

LEVIATHANS

THE GREAT WAR

A MONSTER IN THE SKY

Steve Mohan, Jr.



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A LEVIATHANS NOVELLA

A
MONSTER
IN THE
SKY

BY STEVE MOHAN, JR.

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A MONSTER IN THE SKY

The bowl of the sky was lavender with the dying night. *Polkovnik* Mikhail Kozlov's mighty vessel rocked gently at tether. A life-long mariner, Kozlov handled the ship's easy roll without thinking of it. His mind was on other things.

On this morning, the morning of eighteen October 1896, the tsar's proudest ships were moving to break the Japanese stranglehold on Vladivostok. Even now, the sleek, powerful hulls of the Baltic Fleet were slicing through the blue waters of the Korean Strait on their way to punish the Imperial Japanese Navy.

And here was Kozlov, wearing a strange uniform with a strange rank, commander of a *skyship*, a vessel of so little importance that Admiral Rozhstvensky had declined to order out the skyfleet in support of his grand ships.

Here he was, the *polkovnik* in command of the RVS *Prince Baratinsky*, and he could do nothing. He shook his head. *Polkovnik*. A *polkovnik* was something like a colonel. Whenever Kozlov heard the title he thought "Captain."

Kozlov laid a hand on the bulk of Turret Adeen. The forward turret housed two massive eight-inch guns. If only he had a chance to show—

But, no. Kozlov inhaled a deep breath of cold air. The skyships had their uses: they could spot, and they could harass infantry, but the Battle of Port Arthur proved that three- and five-inch guns were no match for the Japanese fleet's heavy weaponry. Would his unproven eight-inchers really fare any better against the Japanese twelve-inch guns and nine-inch-thick Krupp armor?

He lifted his hand from the turret's flank, his palm suddenly cold from the steel.

All around his vessel the fleet hung at tether, *Baratinsky's* mate *Aleksandr Nevsky* and a score of *Berkuts*, the skyship equivalent of gunboats. They hovered a hundred feet above the earth, moored by great manila hawsers. They looked like balloons, their hulls painted a pale blue.

The Cossacks of the sky, General Ardan Tomav called them.

Kozlov had never seen anything so ridiculous in his whole life. Nor anything so magnificent.

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He sighed and looked up, watching dawn break gold and yellow across the eastern sky. If he avoided looking over the railing, he could convince himself he was aboard a ship at sea. He felt the rumble of machinery through the deck, the chill morning wind tearing at his coat, the motion of a vessel battling the will of the world.

There had been a time when he'd thought these things were enough. He'd forsaken a promising naval career to sail the sky. But now he found he missed the cold spray and the taste of salt.

Missed the glory of serving the *Rodina*, the Motherland, in a way that mattered.

Kozlov's mouth tasted dry. He stood there for a long moment, just looking at the brightening sky.

An urgent, muffled call emerged from a nearby voice tube, jerking him out of his reverie: "Polkovnik *to the bridge.*"

Kozlov flew up the steel ladder that led to the port bridge wing, his mind racing. On a naval vessel, this word was passed only in the case of collision, casualty or enemy action. Kozlov couldn't imagine what emergency demanded his presence on his bridge. He ran, his heart pounding in the cage of his chest.

He burst onto the bridge, throwing open the hatch so that it slammed against the steel bulkhead.

One officer and one noncom stood bridge watch while at tether; a junior sergeant at the wheel and the lieutenant (*nyet, poruchik*, the rank was *poruchik*) at the compass stand. The lee helm and the chart table were unmanned.

The compass stand sat all the way forward, just below the great windows that looked out on the world. The *poruchik* in his long, black leather coat over green trousers and high brown boots (Golubev was his name) was bathed in the dawn's glow.

And yet his face was ghastly pale, his jaw hung slackly open, his eyes . . . lost. Kozlov had seen such a look only once before. When he'd been a junior lieutenant aboard the battleship *Retvizan*, one of his young seamen had been washed over the side in heavy seas. Kozlov had seen the very same look of despair and shock on the face of that boy's mother.

"*What is it?*" Kozlov shouted.

Golubev handed him a slip of paper, a telegraphic message. Kozlov knew with one look that it came from Admiral Rozhstvensky. *The fleet.*

PRESENT LOCATION KOREAN ST 8 MILES NORTH-NW
TSUSHIMA ISL.

JAPANESE HAVE CROSSED MY TEE.

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Kozlov's gut clenched. Crossing the tee was an ancient naval tactic, allowing a fleet to bring all its guns to bear while its opponent was restricted to forward guns only. It was a sure recipe for disaster.

The message listed the fleet's losses: two battleships, a pair of cruisers and four destroyers. *So far*. Kozlov wanted to stop reading, wanted the terrible roll call to end. But he couldn't tear his eyes away. He stood there, *frozen*.

REQUEST IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE.

The urgency—the panic—in the message was clear as daylight. Kozlov turned to the junior sergeant at the wheel. "All hands to battle stations."

"All hands to battle stations, yes sir," snapped the sergeant. He turned and pulled at the bell behind him, filling the bridge with a rapid ringing that carried throughout the ship by a network of tubes.

Kozlov pointed at Golubev. "Make preparations to get underway."

The young officer blinked. "Sir." He opened his mouth, closed it again. "Sir, we don't have orders."

"*YOU DO*," Kozlov roared. And then under his breath: "And soon we will, as well."

Kozlov wrote out a quick message for his telegraphic operator. He addressed it to General Ardan Tomav, father of the Cossacks of the sky:

MAKING PREPARATIONS TO GET UNDERWAY. WILL TAKE
SKYFLEET TO TSUSHIMA ISL TO ASSIST BALTIC FLEET.

He handed the slip of paper to the watch messenger, then told Golubev to signal the fleet his intentions. Then he stepped back, standing in the center of tumult as watchstanders took their stations, shouting clipped reports to the deck officer.

And then silence came again to his bridge. A stray tendril of smoke found its way to him, smelling of the fires of hell. Engineering was bringing up the standby boilers. Somewhere belowdecks, stokers were feeding the fires at *Baratinsky's* heart, sweat gleaming on their bare backs.

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The messenger returned with another message.

BALTIC FLEET MUST BE SAVED AT ALL COSTS.

Which was clear enough. Kozlov was to trade the vessels of the skyfleet, *all of them, if he had to*, in exchange for the Baltic Fleet's escape. "Yes sir," he said crisply.

GODSPEED, MISHA. GEN TOMAV SENDS.

The deck officer came to attention as Kozlov looked up. "Lines are singled up, sir. Standing by engines. Deckhands are standing by to take up lines."

"Very well, Mr. Golubev. Take up lines."

"Take up lines, yes sir." The young *poruchik* repeated the order into a brass voice tube, and the order would be repeated through a megaphone to the men on the ground.

Somewhere below them, young ground conscripts were prying manila lines loose from bollards with marlinespikes. Men on the skyship's deck were rapidly hauling up the heavy mooring hawsers hand-over-hand.

A voice sounded in the brass tube.

"All lines taken up, sir."

"Very well, deck officer." Kozlov turned to the petty officer, *nyet*, the junior sergeant at lee helm. "Ahead slow."

A few seconds passed and then Kozlov heard the distant buzz of his propellers coming up to speed, great blades enclosed in aluminum cowlings beating the sky.

Kozlov pointed at the man who was the watch's lead sergeant. "One long blast."

The sergeant pulled a lever and the ship's horn sounded for precisely three seconds, drowning out all other noise and warning the assembled company that *Prince Baratinsky* was underway.

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And then Kozlov's skyship, his unimportant skyship, began to move through the newly born sky.



The black smoke of battle stung Togo Heihachiro's eyes, burned them, clawed at them, until tears streamed down his cheeks and he had to lower the heavy binoculars that made his old hands ache and wipe away the tears with his dark blue sleeve. His ears—his *head*—rang with the constant report of *Mikasa's* forward pair of twelve-inch, 40-caliber guns. He smelled the stink of battle—steam and burning coal, the bittersweet odor of spent explosives and, because the Russian flagship, *Knyaz Suворov*, had managed to land several blows with her own twelve-inch guns, the coppery stink of spilled blood.

It was glorious, all of it.

He stood on *Mikasa's* topgallant forecastle above the battleship's boxy bridge. His station was the compass stand where he could monitor the ship's heading and pass orders down to the captain through the twin voice tubes. But the real advantage of his station was that he could see.

See everything.

Behind him the ship's two stacks belched smoke and steam into the blue sky, and the sea was a roiled turquoise. Three capital ships steamed in a neat line behind him, the four battleships the beating heart of his fleet. Officers clustered all around him, dressed in dark blue, wearing gold aiguillettes draped across their shoulders to mark them as his aides as they bustled about their duties.

But what really commanded Togo's attention was the signal flag overhead, rippling and flapping in the gale of *Mikasa's* flank bell. The flag was a square, built from four triangles, one black, one yellow, one blue and one red, the apex of each meeting in the flag's center.

What the English called the Zed flag.

Today, Togo was using it to send a special message to his fleet: "The Empire's fate depends on the result of this battle. Let every man do his utmost duty."

And his men and ships *were* doing their duty. *This is almost over.*

He raised the binoculars to his eyes.

The Russians were running flat out, for all the good it would do them; their remaining battleships and cruisers holding their battle line, torpedo boats and destroyers screening the capital ships' port and starboard quarters. Toho ignored the smaller vessels, intently watching the battleships.

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There.

He saw a slight jog in the white wake that stretched out from the lead vessel's wake. "Suworov's showing starboard aspect," he called out.

"Enemy's turning due west," agreed Taniguchi Shintaro, Togo's flag lieutenant. "It looks like a turn together."

The boy was right. The Russians weren't turning in sequence; they had turned all at once, which meant they weren't holding their battle line. They spread out before him, running west, fleeing at best possible speed to the safety of their base at Port Arthur.

They were not going to make it.

"We can cross their tee again," said Taniguchi eagerly.

Togo's fleet was capable of sixteen knots. The Baltic Fleet, its hulls fouled and its machinery taxed by the long journey to the Pacific, was capable of perhaps nine or ten. The admiral had used his advantage in speed and maneuverability to cross the Russians' tee twice, with devastating results. While he could smash the Russian vessels with full broadsides, they could only answer with their forward turrets. That tactic, combined with the superior Japanese gunnery, had taken a toll.

If Togo executed the maneuver again, he could send perhaps a third of the remaining Russian ships to the bottom. But for his entire battle force to pass along the tee and then turn back to pursue would take perhaps forty, forty-five minutes. At ten knots, the surviving Russians would gain almost seven nautical miles.

Fourteen thousand yards.

He could send a third of them to the bottom. *But he wanted them all.*

"*Iie,*" Togo barked. He was silent for a long moment, vectors and times and speeds spinning in his head. When he spoke there was steel in his voice. "We will turn in sequence in eight minutes to new course two six one. Verify my calculations and then haul up the signal flags."

"*Hai, Admiral-sama,*" Taniguchi barked.

Togo had just committed his fleet to a flat-out run followed by a ship-to-ship battle at close range. It was a brutal decision, but looking at the Russian vessels, he could make no other.

He would have them all.

And then a lookout called, "*Leviathans. West-northwest.*"

Togo dropped his binoculars and turned to look where the boy was pointing. He saw a cloud of the small gunboats the Russians called *Berkuts*, and two of

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the bigger vessels, the RVS *Aleksandr Nevsky* and a second vessel that looked like it might be the *Nevsky's* sister.

He felt a flutter of unease in his stomach. No commander liked the words *might be*.

"Maneuvering calculations place us on an intercept course if we turn to . . . " the flag navigator looked up. "Two five eight."

Togo heard the awe in the young man's voice and allowed himself a small smile. He had been off by three degrees; he had eyeballed the enemy's course and speed and his calculation had been off by only *three degrees*.

"Raise the signal flags," said Togo. "Turn in sequence to two five eight."

"*Hai*," said his signal officer. "Raise the signal flags. Turn in sequence to two five eight."

Taniguchi stepped to his side and pitched his voice so only the admiral could hear him. "Admiral—" The boy hesitated.

"Out with it, Lieutenant," said Togo evenly.

"Sir, perhaps we should reconsider the pursuit. The leviathans—"

The admiral snorted. "Get hold of yourself, Taniguchi-*san*. The skyships are *toys*. This is the age of the gun, and their weight restrictions guarantee that the leviathans will never match our firepower."

"*Hai*, Admiral Togo-*sama*," said the boy uneasily.

"We will smash the Russian fleet and the world's interest in leviathans all in one instant." Togo's eyes found the Zed flag. "And Japan will rule the east."

This time the boy's answer wasn't hesitant. "*Hai!*"

"Sir," called out the navigator, "recommend you mark the turn in ten seconds." He held up a gold pocket watch so the admiral could see the sweep of its second hand.

When it hit twelve, Togo leaned over the voice tube. "Captain, come to new course two five eight."

"Come to new course two five eight, yes sir," came the reply.

Behind him, the flag signal officer was hauling down the tactical signal, ordering the fleet to execute the order. As each of his battleships and cruisers came to the point in the ocean where *Mikasa* had turned, they would follow the flagship right.

In that moment the die was cast; the fate of the Russians sealed.

And then, Togo looked up. The leviathans had organized themselves into a long line abreast across his intended course, the two great ships in the center, ten or eleven gunboats on either side, stretching out like the wings of some

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great and terrible bird. The Russians hovered only a hundred feet off the water, a skirmish line set between Togo and his prey.

Togo studied the vessel he did not know; sister to *Nevsy*, the size of a naval destroyer or a light cruiser, her bow massive and blunt over a forward-sloping skirt. Her bridge was set in a tower behind her forward gun turret. And her guns— This was supposed to be a sister to *Nevsy*, but—

Were those bigger guns?

Togo watched the vessel as his battleship swept toward her at sixteen knots. Watched it hovering *in the sky*, finding the sight as fantastic as ever. Five or six *thousand* tons of steel and coal and guns and men floating in the air as light as a soap bubble. Casting its dark shadow on the blue, blue sea. It was an abomination.

It was a monster in the sky.

Togo was going to destroy it, was going to destroy them all. Today and for always. These playthings had no place in the honorable affairs of men.

And again, Admiral Togo Heihachiro felt that light flutter of unease in his stomach.

Nothing more than unease.



Kozlov stepped to the port bridgewing. He wanted to see the Japanese coming with his own eyes, unfiltered by glass. It was dangerous on a skyship's deck when underway, buffeted by heaven's angry winds, and Kozlov had published a standing order that required all officers and ratings to clip their safety lanyards to the steel padeyes bolted to the ship's superstructure when outside.

But this was war.

Speed was important. And more was at stake than Kozlov's meager life.

As he watched, the Japanese flagship *Mikasa* fired, simultaneous with his turn. His forward guns belched billowing flame, molten orange and yellow mixed with tendrils of sulfurous black, pumping out a pressure impulse so powerful that it churned the cobalt water white; for a moment the sea next to *Mikasa's* hull was *hollowed out* before it came rushing back in to reclaim what it had lost. A second later, the sound came to Kozlov, the *crack* of a close lightning strike, so close you can feel the hair rise on your body and you jump, even as everything around you rattles and shakes with the terrible blow.

Holy God.

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So *these* were the Japanese guns.

And if the guns were terrible, the *gunners* were even more fearsome. As Kozlov watched, white water geysered a scant twenty-five yards astern of a fleeing Russian destroyer. A near miss, fired at range, by a ship moving at flank speed *in the middle of a turn*.

Mikasa's guns spoke again, sooner than he would have thought possible. And this time there was no escape for the doomed destroyer. One moment the little ship was sprinting for his life and the next—

The twin shells smashed into the little ship dead astern, instantly sending up a column of spray and orange fire and debris and *men*. A terrible palsy rippled the destroyer's hull. He suddenly veered starboard and then *stopped*.

Kozlov could not swallow.

Steering casualty. The little ship was not under command. The last hit had robbed him of the ability to flee.

Kozlov had grown up in Novosibirsk in Asian Russia. As a boy he'd hunted deer with his father in the dark Siberian forest. On one such trip he'd somehow managed to become separated from his father. He trudged through an early spring snow, cold, miserable, lost, the dead weight of his old rifle cradled in his arms.

Suddenly he looked up and saw a deer. It was a big doe, maybe one hundred-twenty, one hundred-thirty pounds, tawny coat, ears pricked, nose twitching.

Liquid brown eyes looking right into his.

Young Misha knew he should shoot the deer, but he was only eight and not yet used to killing things. He didn't know why the doe didn't flee, but for a long time the two of them stood there unmoving, staring at one another.

And then an orange-and-black terror erupted from a thicket not six feet from where Misha stood. The tiger launched itself into the air, expending all the power stored in its legs in one leap. Its jump missed the doe, but the animal still landed a blow at the last second that broke the deer's right hind.

The little creature tried to drag itself away, bleating with pain, barely moving but still fleeing, because that's what its instincts told it to do. The tiger didn't even bother to run. It *loped* after the deer, brought it down.

Ate it alive.

And that was exactly what was going to happen to the destroyer.

As Kozlov watched, the Japanese battleship fired *again*, this time hitting amidships.

It took less than a minute for the little destroyer to slip completely beneath the waves.

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Kozlov turned and stepped back into the bridge. If he did not act, the fleet's fate would be the same as the destroyer's. In addition to their devastating advantages in gunnery and armor, the Japanese were much, much faster than their Russian counterparts. The Japanese battle line would stab through the center of the Russian formation like a blade, battleships and cruisers firing withering broadsides until no targets remained.

The Baltic Fleet would never reach the shelter of Port Arthur's shore batteries.

Unless the skyships could slow the Japanese.

Kozlov turned to his deck officer. "Pass the signal to all ships: target the lead Japanese battleship and *fire*."



Togo looked up at the line of warships hovering over the sea, not more than four or five thousand yards from his position. He did not like having the enemy above his head, but then, they'd been there before, hadn't they? Off the coast of Port Arthur, the Russian leviathans had tried to turn the tide.

And failed.

Oh, they had damaged ship superstructures and they'd killed some of his ratings. And they'd plagued the Japanese infantry, earning the name *Rairyuuha*—Thunder Dragons. But those accomplishments were not the same as punching through the Imperial Navy's fine Krupp armor.

And if a ship's armor could not be breached, she could not be sunk.

Suddenly the leviathans' guns erupted into orange flame. Togo stood firm. If today was his day to die, he would face it like a man.

For a moment the air was filled with the whistle of falling shells, and then the sea erupted in towering fountains of white water, drenching the men standing behind him. He heard their startled gasps. Togo remained impassive. He watched.

The leviathans were firing at range, their three- and five-inch guns barely able to reach *Mikasa* with any kind of accuracy. The enemy could do very little to hurt him. But the reverse was not true.

Togo leaned toward the voice tube. "Captain, come to new course three four eight." His battle line was steaming directly for the leviathan line, like a spear thrust at a shield. By turning ninety degrees he was presenting his port side to the enemy, but sacrificing his pursuit of the fleeing Baltic Fleet.

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Togo turned to his signal officer. "Signal 'All Ships Continue Pursuit of Enemy.'"

The officer bowed. "*Hai*. All Ships Continue Pursuit of Enemy."

Strictly speaking, the order wasn't necessary, but Togo wanted to be absolutely sure that his battle line did not follow him into the turn. His main force would continue its pursuit of the Baltic Fleet, and *Mikasa's* heavy guns would smash the leviathans from the sky.

A grim smile touched Togo's lips as he gave his next order.

"Captain, redirect fire at the line of leviathans. All port batteries. You may fire at your leisure."



Kozlov allowed a smile to touch his lips as he watched *Mikasa* turn. *The Japanese were taking the bait. He was drawing them off their pursuit.* And then the smile froze.

The second battleship did not turn. He watched the golden chrysanthemum on the warship's bow, the emblem of the Japanese emperor, waited for it to slide right. But the second battleship never wavered. Nor did his two brothers behind him. All three battleships knifed straight through the water and past their flagship, which was slowing and steadying on a new course.

The main Japanese battle line would not be drawn off. They were going straight for the Baltic Fleet while *Mikasa* dealt with the skyships alone. And he could do it, too. Kozlov had twenty-two *Berkut* gunships and two *Nevsky*-class cruisers, but *Mikasa's* port side bristled with guns—seven six-inch 40-cals, five three-inchers, and of course, the monsters: a quartet of Elswick twelve-inch 40-caliber heavy guns. More than enough firepower to knock his little fleet out of the sky.

And as Kozlov watched, the great ship's guns elevated, his superior gunners taking aim.



Mikasa's guns opened up with the fury of hell itself. For a moment there was nothing—and then the sea exploded a few hundred yards in front of the leviathan's shadows. *Too high*, Togo thought. *The gunners have trained their guns too high.*

His fleet had the best gunners afloat. They would determine their error.

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The admiral stood stock still, enemy shells raining down all around his ship, drawing closer, the Russian fire drawing closer. An enemy shell hit amidships, the dull clank of the impact rising in the cold air. Billowing smoke and flame blossomed from the port side. Then there was another hit. And *another*. One of the enemy gunners had found *Mikasa's* range at last. *Clank-clank-clank*. Now the enemy shells were pounding his hull like a hard rain.

Togo drew a deep breath and ran to the ladder, climbed down, ignoring the shouts of his aides who must've thought he'd gone mad. He climbed quickly, past the bridge, hand over hand, jumping the last four feet to the wood deck and landing in a crouch. Ignoring the flash of the enemy's fire, he ran to the side of his ship and peered over the safety railing.

The black of burnt paint and spent explosives streaked the gray hull. There were ugly dents all along the port side where the armor was beginning to buckle, but the nine-inch steel plates had not been pierced.

The Krupp armor had withstood the full fury of the enemy's assault. Which meant that *Mikasa* could not be defeated.

Togo stood, satisfied to return to the forecastle. As he turned, he saw *Mikasa's* forward twelve-inch guns lower a few degrees.

And then they spoke.

He turned back, just in time to see the massive shells hit. One moment he was looking at a *Berkut* gunship, maybe a third the size of the *Nevisky* and her sister, and then suddenly the sky was filled with fire.

It started just behind the leviathan's main guns, an explosion, orange flame leaping twenty feet into the air, debris raining into the ocean, and then there was a *second* explosion, a massive *whump* that seemed to rattle the world. *Secondary explosion*, Togo thought. *Forward magazine*.

All at once the sky was gray and hazy with debris: cinders glowing bright orange and jagged pieces of wooden paneling and long, uncoiling lengths of rope, and a million fluttering pieces of paper like a flock of geese startled into the air by a gunshot.

And bodies.

Some still and falling with a dead man's weight, some screaming, some *burning*, no more than a black silhouette against the flames devouring their flesh as they plummeted toward the sea.

The ship itself, broken and burning, spiraled out of the air as eletroid leaked from its hull.

All this Togo saw in an instant.

Before the next blast from *Mikasa's* guns.

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One moment Kozlov was standing there, watching the fleet's gunners find their range, shells starting to smash into the battleship's hull. Given a few more seconds *Baratinsky's* gunners would find the right angle and his eight-inchers would—

God's hand reached down and grabbed Kozlov, hurling him across the bridge and smashing him against the starboard bulkhead. The *polkovnik* lay there for a moment, stunned. He had the impression that there had been a huge noise, but in fact there was silence, total silence, and for a second he thought he might be dead.

He looked up and saw one of his junior sergeants standing over him, the left side of his face masked in dark blood from a gash just over his left eye. The man was screaming at him, his mouth wide open, muscles standing out like cords in his neck, but Kozlov could barely hear.

He touched his right ear and his hand came away stained crimson.

Kozlov scrambled to his feet. If he *were* dead, he must be in hell. The glass in the forward windows had shattered and the blue tile deck was littered with thousands of blue-green shards of glass and streaked with blood. One of his men, young Golubev, lay on the deck.

Kozlov crouched by the *poruchik's* still form, feeling for a pulse.

Nothing.

The boy was dead.

The *polkovnik* stood, trying to understand what had happened.

He looked out the opening on the port side of his bridge that had once contained glass, and what he saw was one of his gunships sinking through the air. The little vessel had taken position directly outboard *Baratinsky*, no more than three hundred yards off the cruiser's port beam.

Now he was a collection of twisted and burning wreckage. The main gun turret was *gone*, just gone, and the deck after where it should've been was blackened and burning. The scorched steel had opened up like a blooming flower.

"Secondary explosion," Kozlov whispered.

The terrible explosion had also taken the ship's pilot house. As Kozlov watched, the vessel heeled over. The *Berkuts* carried two eletroid spheres along their keels. The forward sphere must have been destroyed in the explosion,

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releasing the eletroid and with it losing the positive buoyancy needed to keep the gunship's corpse in the sky.

With its rear sphere still intact but its forward sphere crushed, the vessel fell toward the sea bow-first, like a sinking ship plunging toward the ocean floor.

Kozlov's hopes fell with the *Berkut*. This was the worst possible outcome. He was sacrificing his skyships, but there was no chance of slowing the main Japanese force. He would lose his men and his ships *and* the Baltic Fleet.

Kozlov turned and met the eyes of the junior sergeant whose face was a half-mask of blood. Can you hear me? Kozlov shouted.

He couldn't hear himself, but the sergeant nodded vigorously.

Good, said Kozlov. Signal the fleet. All skyships break formation. Withdraw. Attack the main body of the Japanese fleet. Commanders select targets at will. Just slow them down. *Slow them down.*



From his perch on the topgallant forecastle Togo watched the Russian leviathans break and *run*. It was a glorious rout, and he wished the whole world could see it. A fleet of skyships beaten by a single battleship.

And then he saw that it wasn't quite a rout. The Russian vessels were withdrawing, but they were withdrawing in good order and they were running *toward* his fleet. Togo's eyes narrowed. The Russian commander must be mad. Beaten by a single battleship, the man now chose to engage a *fleet* of cruisers and battleships.

No matter. Some men demonstrated difficulty in learning the realities of the world. If it was his fate to instruct them, so be it. He turned to Taniguchi. "Signal the cruisers *Kasuga* and *Nisshin* to retrain their guns on the leviathans. All other vessels are to concentrate their fire on the Baltic Fleet."

His aide ducked his head. "*Hai, Togo-sama.*"

This was one fight Togo didn't intend to miss. He gave new orders. "Captain, left full rudder, come to new course two four nine. All ahead flank. It is time for *Mikasa* to rejoin her fleet."



Wind tore at Kozlov's clothes, buffeted his body, assaulted his face until tears streamed from his eyes and were carried away. The *polkovnik* wrapped an arm around the center framing of his shattered windows, holding himself

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up against the wind, against the treacherously blood-slicked deck, against the nausea roiling his stomach and the ice-pick agony throbbing in his ears.

"Fire," Kozlov roared.

Baratinsky shook with the recoil of his eight-inchers. Water exploded on the far side of the Japanese destroyer.

"Bracketed," Kozlov called out. The last shot had been on the destroyer's near side. His gunners had found their range.

Knowing he was doomed, the destroyer turned hard to starboard at thirty knots, kicking up a rooster-tail of white spray. The little ship's principal weapons were his twin 18-inch torpedo tubes, but he made a brave noise with his three-incher. A gray line of shells rose from the sea and shot into the sky only a score of yards from where Kozlov stood.

"Steady, helm," he barked. "I don't want this ship to move an inch."

The junior sergeant on the helm said something, but Kozlov couldn't distinguish the words. He had gone from hearing nothing to hearing muffled sounds. It was like overhearing a conversation through a closed door. It wasn't much—but he would take what he could get.

He looked at his bridge crew. They looked back at him, faces naked with fear, wanting desperately for him to somehow make it all okay.

"Don't worry about that little three-incher, boys," he said. "He's trying to run, which means he can't bring his gun all the way around *and* he's firing on the move. His problem's much harder than ours. So we're going to wait right here until our gunners find his range."

His boys all nodded. Kozlov imagined he heard a few "yessirs."

And then suddenly they were all pointing, their mouths open in silent yells, jumping up and down and pounding each other on the back.

Kozlov turned in time to see a great gout of flame stab high into the sky.

Baratinsky's eight-inch shells had punched through the destroyer's armor. The destroyer's stern was down by at least ten feet and listing heavily to port. But that wasn't what caught Kozlov's attention.

His fourth stack was damaged, *exploded* like a joke cigar. Heavy black smoke poured from the mangled stack. In a flash of insight, Kozlov understood what had happened. One of the shells must have dropped straight down the stack, destroying the last of the four Yarrow boilers.

Unobstructed by armor.

And *Baratinsky* had been so high that the destroyer couldn't reach up to hit him. *Why didn't I see it before?* thought Kozlov. In warfare it's always

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been advantageous to hold the high ground—and what ground is higher than the sky?

He stepped through the hole of the missing window onto the port bridge wing to take a new look at the battle raging all around him. Skyships lumbered through the heavens, trying to avoid the more powerful Japanese gunfire. The battle had devolved into twenty, thirty skirmishes, and the Russians seemed to be losing them all.

But it didn't have to be that way.

Suddenly his replacement deck officer was by his side, pulling him back inside the pilot house. The boy was pointing frantically out the windows. Kozlov saw the damaged Japanese destroyer limping away, trailing ugly black smoke. He thought he heard the boy say: "pursue."

Kozlov shook his head. "*Nyet, nyet.*" And this time, miracle of miracles, his abused ears converted that little bit of pressure into sound. "Signal the fleet."



Overhead, one of the leviathan gunboats rocked with blows from the guns of one of Togo's destroyers. The skyship careened drunkenly across the sky.

Togo raised his binoculars and watched the wounded bird struggle to stay aloft. The Russian commander had divided his fleet, trading a fight against one battleship for a fight against an entire battle fleet. It was a desperate move—one that could only end in the Russians' destruction.

Togo shifted his view left and saw the protected cruiser *Kasagi*, harried by a pair of Russian gunships, turn sharply to port, unmasking her batteries. *Kasagi* elevated her guns and fired *up*. One of the gunships wandered too close to the stream of shells fired from *Kasagi*'s lethal eight-inch guns. The *Berkut* shuddered and juked across the sky, rapidly losing altitude.

But the second gunship managed to stay out of *Kasagi*'s line of fire, safely outside the angle to which her guns could elevate. The determined little skyship positioned her guns so her shells fell just beyond her own bow and plunged directly down toward her enemy. The *Berkut* poured down fire onto the cruiser, accepting the fact that its three- and five-inch fire that couldn't penetrate the cruiser's four-inch armor could handily smash the bridge and kill deck hands.

The gunship and the cruiser were tangled together. *Kasagi* was like a horse trying to shake off a biting fly. The horse was infinitely more powerful, but the fly was almost impossible to catch.

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Worse. The little *Berkut* had managed to lure *Kasagi* out of the Japanese fleet's battle line. Togo's vessels were being delayed and drawn off. And every second the Baltic Fleet survived brought them a second closer to safety.

Togo pointed at the cruiser and glanced back at Taniguchi. "Instruct *Kasagi* to return to her station."

The young officer bobbed his head. "*Hai, Togo-sama.*"

Togo raised his binoculars, watching the cruiser. The gunship fired a volley and the shells arced harmlessly over *Kasagi*'s crow's-nest. *Toys*, he thought. *Do not bend your will to the makers of toys.*

The cruiser suddenly turned right. Togo saw the moment when her captain put on the flank bell, the screws churning the water as *Kasagi* accelerated to her top speed of 23 knots. She raced back to her position in line, the gunship lobbing shells after her.

"Good," Togo whispered, "good."

If they kept moving toward the Russian fleet, they could not be denied.

The Russian *Berkut* fired another volley.

The Russians could not do Togo's fleet any real harm. They could only win the day if—

His breath caught in his throat.

A sound like thunder rolled across the water, drowning out the staccato boom of gunfire for several seconds. It was followed by a massive fireball, incandescent orange fire burning to bitter black smoke. *Kasagi* swerved left and then right. There were men running around on her deck, some of them on fire, some of them leaping into the sea.

The leviathan had been lucky, smashing a shell into the cruiser's forward magazine and igniting a massive secondary explosion.

Except—it hadn't been luck. As he examined the scene before him, Togo realized it was a deliberate tactic. The leviathans were hovering almost directly above his ships, out of reach of his big naval guns, lobbing their shells *down*. Tearing into ship superstructures and stacks, hitting his vessels where their armor was thinnest.

Another peal of thunder rolled across the sea. He turned to see a Japanese torpedo boat pull out of formation, bleeding acrid smoke from her second stack like a gutted man bleeds dark blood from his belly.

Rage took Togo then, rage and *fear*.

Fortunately, he knew exactly what he had to do.



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Like a sea captain who lashes himself to the forward mast in the face of a hurricane, Kozlov clung to his precarious perch on the shattered bridge of the *Prince Baratinsky*. The storm raged all around him, but he thought he could see the lightening of the clouds that signaled the coming dawn.

His skyships were taking the battle to the Japanese. It was nearly impossible for a skyship to deliver a knock-out blow to a sea ship, but in this battle, they didn't have to. All they had to do was stay above the enemy's withering fire and keep them occupied.

Every minute the Japanese spent swatting at the bees buzzing around their heads brought the Baltic Fleet a minute closer to escape.

Despite the death and destruction all around him, Kozlov felt a comforting warmth in his chest. He had done the impossible. He had saved the Baltic Fleet and preserved his skyships.

"*Polkovnik*," said the deck officer.

And Kozlov heard it, softly, garbled, and with only one ear, but he *heard* it. "Da, Deck Officer."

The boy was staring at the sea with his binoculars.

"Sir, *Mikasa* is approaching from the northeast."

Kozlov turned and saw. The Japanese battleship was coming in fast, the ensign at his stern, the Rising Sun, flapping madly in the breeze. The *polkovnik* raised his binoculars. The Japanese flagship was racing toward his cousin, the battleship *Fuji*, who was trying vainly to strike back at *Aleksandr Nevsky*, hovering directly overhead.

Kozlov saw the danger at once.

Fuji was swerving all over the place, his wake churning a huge swath of ocean a frothy white, turning right and then left, running in a half-circle. Coming to all-stop and drifting, then putting on a quick backing bell with rudder. Trying everything to get a clear shot at *Nevsky*.

But the skyship was more nimble than his opponent. *Nevsky* couldn't swoop and glide like a bird, but neither did he have to fight his way through water. The sky cruiser was managing to keep his opponent directly beneath him. *Fuji* occasionally landed a blow, but the battleship couldn't manage the sustained barrage that would pull *Nevsky* out of the sky.

But if *Mikasa* pulled alongside his cousin, *his* guns would most certainly reach.

Quickly, Kozlov tracked his binoculars left to right. Japanese vessels were pulling out of their battle line and forming up into pairs, an arrangement

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that would enable each ship to elevate his guns enough to strike at their brother's attacker.

The quiet sense of victory he had felt now turned to ash. In slowing down the Japanese battle fleet he had saved the Baltic Fleet.

And for that he was about to pay the ultimate price.

Kozlov shouted for his signalmen to order *Nevisky* to withdraw.

But it was already too late.



Disaster had stolen upon Togo with quiet feet. The Baltic Fleet had been in his gun sights, literally in his gun sights, and the leviathans had managed to fling themselves in his path to save their more powerful sisters.

For that they would pay.

"Right full rudder," ordered Togo into the voice tube, his voice arctic cold. "Steady up on new course three four seven."

He was coming to a course that paralleled *Fuji*. At five thousands yards abeam of the other battleship, his guns would have sufficient room to target *Nevisky*. If he missed the shells would pass harmlessly over *Fuji*. But they would not miss for long. Togo's gunners would find their target quickly and destroy it. And if the skyship tried to run, she would find herself the target of *two* battleships' fire.

Togo had not delivered the knock-out blow he had planned to the Baltic Fleet, but he had crippled Russian power in the Pacific. And now he would finish the world's flirtation with leviathans with one last, devastating blow.

He would still have a kind of victory.

"We're drawing in range, Togo-sama," reported Taniguchi.

"*Hai*," barked the admiral. He leaned into the voice tube. "Captain, target the Russian sky cruiser. All port batteries. *Commence fire*."

"*Hai*, Togo-sama," answered *Mikasa's* captain.

Shells tore into the cruiser, flaying the light armor from her hull, ripping away the turrets that housed her three- and five-inch guns, blasting men off the ship so they fell like pieces of debris.

When Togo had been a boy, he'd gone to sea on a whaling ship. What he saw now precisely mimicked the moment when a harpoon plunged into the flesh of one of those great beasts. The sky cruiser lunged right, trying to free itself from its attacker, all the while bleeding black smoke and eletroid like a minke whale pouring its life into the cruel sea.

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The leviathan drifted over *Fuji's* centerline, then lurched further right, and suddenly the other battleship's guns opened up. *Fuji's* frustrated gunners found that *Nevisky* had wandered into their gun sights; they poured into her all their rage and hatred.

Eight twelve-inch guns and twelve six-inch guns tore into the staggering leviathan and she seemed to just *dissolve*, her carcass plunging toward the sea.

A jubilant cheer rose behind Togo, his men jumping up and down and pumping their fists into the air, yelling for all they were worth. And as what was left of the Russian sky ship rained down, Togo allowed himself a broad smile.



On his crippled bridge, Kozlov watched *Nevisky* die. One minute the mighty cruiser was there, and the next he was just *not*. At that moment, Kozlov finally understood the terrible price that he and his men would pay to save the Baltic Fleet. He had always understood that price in the dry, analytical precincts of his mind.

But now he understood it in his gut.

"*Helm*," Kozlov barked. "*Come to new course zero four six. Descend to one hundred feet. Lee helm, all ahead flank.*"

"*Polkovnik*," said the deck officer, panic edging his voice. "That will take us—"

"*DO IT*," he roared. "All battery crews, *stand by your guns.*"

"Stand by your guns, yessir," repeated the young deck officer, who now had a life expectancy of between five and ten minutes. If Kozlov was going to be defeated, if his men and ships were going to be destroyed, he was going to take as many as possible of the bastards below with him.

Starting with that unholy devil, *Mikasa*.

"Answering all ahead flank, *Polkovnik*," said the lee helm crisply.

"Steady on new course zero four six," added the helm.

"Very well, gentlemen," said Kozlov, folding his arms across his broad chest. He made himself ready to meet his death as the wind howled through his bridge.

Baratinsky lumbered toward *Mikasa* to avenge *Aleksandr Nevisky's* death.



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Togo scanned the horizon and saw *Newsy's* sister turning. She was maybe ten, twelve thousand yards to the south-southwest of *Mikasa* at an elevation of two hundred feet. The leviathan was wreathed in smoke and she was burning amidships, a yellow flame throwing a column of black smoke into the blue bowl of the sky.

But she was moving.

Togo watched her for a second.

The leviathan's squat bow was swinging *left*.

Togo's hand tightened on the binoculars. She was coming left, coming left and picking up speed.

And descending.

Togo dropped his binoculars. *Fuji* and *Mikasa* were bow-on to the skyship, most of their batteries masked by the angle of the ships. Togo's mouth suddenly went dry. He felt time and distance ticking away as the Russian sky cruiser picked up speed.

He leaned in to the voice tube. "Captain, forward gun mount acquire the cruiser. Fire at the cruiser."

The admiral turned to Taniguchi. The boy was watching the monster as it came for them, watching it with his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide with fear.

"*Lieutenant*," Togo barked. "Order *Fuji* to come right ninety degrees and bring her portside guns to bear on that skyship."

Taniguchi jerked his head down in a rough nod, not even bothering to acknowledge the order. Then he ran back to order the signal himself.

Mikasa's guns opened up. Water exploded a thousand yards behind the skyship.

Togo swallowed. This was not a concern. He had the best gunners afloat. (But the leviathan wasn't exactly *afloat*, was it?) They would lower their elevation. They would find their target. They would pull that obscenity right out of the sky.

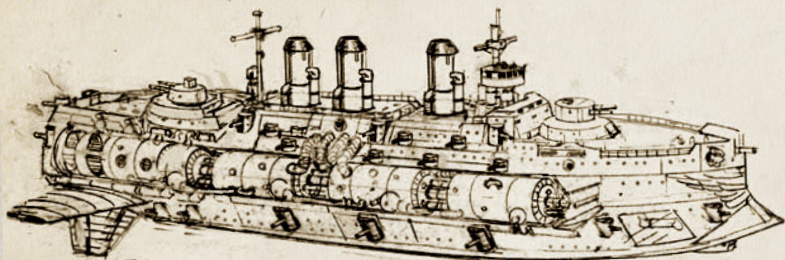
Togo licked his lips, anticipating the next blast from his forward twelve-inchers.

Just as the leviathan came hard right.

The shells missed again, this time on range, but wide right.

And then the leviathan's guns opened up. They were not twelve-inch naval guns. But they weren't three- and five-inch popguns, either. He heard the roar of the cruiser's forward gun mounts and saw white water explode two hundred yards aft of *Fuji's* stern.

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Mikasa answered back. A smoke round traced a neat path *over* the skyship's bulk. Togo slammed his fist into the compass stand. His gun crews had failed to adjust for the beast's descent.

The leviathan's guns roared again, and this time *they hit*. Togo saw smoke and fire billow up, aft. Suddenly *Fuji* was turning.

"What's she doing?" shouted Taniguchi.

"Her rudder's jammed," snapped Togo. *Fuji* was four thousand yards away, but she was coming around again. Now she was stern-on to the leviathan.

And the monster was still coming.

The leviathan was close enough that Togo could see that her bridge was damaged, the glass shattered and the window framing bent. He saw a single figure hanging on to the framing. *He means to kill us*, thought Togo.

"The Russian," he whispered, "he's going to ram us." Togo gave his order. "Come about to a reciprocal course, Captain. Flank bell."

The leviathan's guns spoke like thunder. It was like thunder and a second later, Togo heard the terrible cacophony of a hit, felt an explosion rumble through the guts of his flagship. And *again*. This was not the *clank-clank-clank* of shells bouncing off his hull. This was the horrible sound of shells punching through nine-inch armor.

This was the sound of a mortal blow.

He felt his ship—*his ship*—settle, down by the bow.

The leviathan was close enough that *Mikasa's* forward six-inchers were joining the twelves. And now the world was nothing but the terrible roar of big guns. It was like being *inside* thunder. *Mikasa* was taking a terrible beating, and so was the Russian sky cruiser. He watched as a Russian five-inch gun was

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torn away. And then another. The enemy vessel was shedding armor in huge chunks, it was falling like rain, filling the air with a gray, gritty haze. The fire he had seen amidships reached out toward two more.

But the leviathan still kept coming.

The skyship's guns fired and *Mikasa* shuddered violently, throwing Togo to the deck, smashing his head against the compass stand. For a moment the world faded to gray. The admiral shook his head and jagged pain jerked him back.

The bodies of his aides were scattered all around him, some of them dead and some of them dying. The heavy metallic stench of blood filled his senses. He no longer found it glorious.

The world sloped away from him to the left. *Mikasa* had taken on a fifteen-degree list to port. Even as he lay on the deck he could feel the battleship slipping into the cool embrace of the sea, feel her settling into her destiny.

Her guns had fallen silent. Pointed down at the sea, she could no longer reach the enemy above.

Togo managed to climb to his feet, reached for the voice tube. "Captain," he croaked. He swallowed. "Strike our colors. Abandon ship."

"*Hai*," barked the captain and said no more. This was too painful an order to repeat back.

Over Togo's head the Zed flag was burning. He looked up and saw the battered leviathan claw its way into the blue sky. And at that moment Admiral Togo Heihachiro knew that Japan would not rule the east, after all. And he knew one more thing. It was not the age of the gun.

It was the age of the sky.