

GOLIATH

by



N.Y. Times Best-selling author
Steve Alten

PROLOGUE

Identity: Stage One:

I am small and insignificant, stranded on the vast expanse of nature. I hope I can survive.

–Deepak

Chopra

“Come to course zero-nine-zero, ahead one-third. Make ship’s depth fifty meters.”

“Aye, sir, coming to course zero-nine-zero, making ship’s depth fifty meters.”

“Engage computer.”

“Aye, sir, computer engaged.”

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101100101010110100101101010110110111101001010110101011010010101101001010100101**

“Mr. Chau. Prepare to bring *Sorceress* on-line. Flood nutrient womb. Prepare bacteria for injection.”

“Aye, sir. Nutrient womb flooded. Bacteria ready for injection.”

“Inject bacteria into womb. Engage DNA synthesizers.”

“Aye sir. Injecting bacteria. Engaging DNA synthesizers.”

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“Activate sensor orbs. Activate voice recognition and response programs.”

“Aye, sir. Sensor orbs activated. Voice recognition and response programs on-line.”

“Transfer primary ship’s control to computer. *Sorceress*, this is Covah. Are you on-line?”

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“*Sorceress*, acknowledge.”

Acknowledged. Sorceress on-line.

1

25 September

Atlantic Ocean

Seine Abyssal Plain

112 miles southwest of the Strait of Gibraltar

With an expulsion of air and water, the majestic behemoth breaks the surface, her sickle-shaped dorsal fin cutting the waves, her great tail slapping the sea in defiance before slipping back into the froth.

At one hundred twenty tons, the Blue whale is easily the largest living organism ever to have existed on the planet, often reaching lengths of one-hundred feet or more. Ten tons of blood surge through its body, driven by a heart the size of a small car. Despite its prodigious girth, the mammal is not a predator but a forager of mini-fauna, thriving on a diet of krill and crustaceans, which it sieves from the water through its baleen plates.

The adult female rises again, guiding her two-month old calf to a labored breath above the storm-threatened seas.

* * *

A thousand feet below, an ominous presence moves silently through the depths.

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Demonic scarlet eyes, pupil-less and unblinking, blaze luminescent through the blackness of the abyss. Its gargantuan torso, cloaked in the darkness, scatters every creature in its path.

Sensing a disturbance above, the creature banks sharply away from the sea floor and rises, homing in on the mother Blue and her calf.

The leviathan ascends, its bulk piercing the swaying gray curtains of the shallows, the filtered rays of sunlight revealing the enormous winged contours of a monstrous sting ray. So quiet is the predator that the adult Blue whale fails to detect its presence until it is nearly upon them. In a sudden frenzy of movement, the startled mother slaps her fluke and pushes her newborn below, rolling on top of her offspring to shield it from the jowls of the hunter.

The ungodly behemoth pursues, its flat, triangular mouth remaining close to the gyrating tails of the frightened mammals.

Yet the beast does not attack. Maneuvering through a trail of bubbles, it keeps the tip of its snout within a fin's length of the adult's thrashing fluke, taunting its quarry in a terrifying game of cat and mouse. Hunted and hunter race through the thermocline, the thin layer of water separating the sun-warmed surface waters from the colder depths.

In due time, the leviathan tires of the chase. With a burst of speed, it soars beneath its terrified prey, buffeting them in its wake as it returns once more to the silence of the depths.

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Darkness and cold envelope the devilfish, black, save for the hellish glow surrounding its unearthly eyes. At 900 feet it levels out, its streamlined bulk creating barely a ripple. Gliding high above the desolate floor of the abyssal plain, it continues its journey west, homing in on its true quarry.

***Atlantic Ocean:
235 Nautical Miles due west of the Strait of Gibraltar***

15:12 hours

Sailing beneath a mouse-gray autumn sky, the United States Aircraft Carrier *Ronald Reagan* (CVN-76) plows through the sea, its steel bow cutting a path through the twelve-foot swells at a steady twenty knots.

Below decks, Captain James Robert Hatcher, the fifty-two-year old Commanding Officer of the *Ronald Reagan*, ignores the grins of his crew as he vacates the exercise room and double-times it down one of the ship's two central passageways. Ducking deftly through a dozen watertight hatches and knee-knockers, he arrives in "blue tile country," the central command-and-control complex for the aircraft carrier and its battle group.

The *Ronald Reagan* is a veritable fortress of modern-day warfare. One-thousand feet long, with an island infrastructure towering twenty stories above the waterline, the Nimitz-Class "Super-carrier" is by far the largest and heaviest object at sea, weighing in at 97,000 tons. Despite its mammoth girth, the ship is fast, its four 21-foot wide bronze

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propellers, powered by two nuclear reactors, able to drive the vessel 700 nautical miles a day at speeds in excess of 30 knots.

The Super-carrier and its fleet project the awesome forward presence and might of the United States Armed Forces. On its roof lies a four-and-a-half acre airport, managed by a city of six-thousand men and women. Positioned along its flattop and in the hanger deck below are more than 70 aircraft, including two squadrons of F/A-18E and 18F Super Hornets, eight CSA (Common Support Aircraft) designed for electronics, communications, intelligence, refueling, and antisubmarine warfare, four AEW (Airborne Early Warning) Surface Surveillance craft, and a squadron of fourteen brand-new, stealth Joint Strike Fighters (JSFs). Carrying a multitude of offensive weapons, the “swarm” literally sews up all of the CVBG’s airspace.

The Carrier’s defensive weaponry includes the Evolved Sea Sparrow short-range surface-to-air missile (ESSM), three eight-round Mk. 29 Sea Sparrow SAM launchers, the SLQ-32 electronic warfare system, and the Vulcan Phalanx Close-in missile defense system, a rapid-fire gun capable of shooting 900 rounds per second of 20-mm ammunition.

Along with its own defenses, the carrier travels within a multi-layered battle group (CVBG), making it nearly invincible on the open sea. Surrounding the *Ronald Reagan* are sixteen combat ships, ten support ships, and two *Los Angeles-class* attack subs, the *USS Jacksonville*, (SSN-699) and the *USS Hampton* (SSN-767). Positioned

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along either side of the *Ronald Reagan* are her two 567-foot Ticonderoga-class escorts, the *USS Leyte Gulf* and the *USS Yorktown*.

The two guided-missile cruisers share one mission: Protect the aircraft carrier at all costs. Each warship is equipped with the Aegis Theater High Altitude Air Defense (THADD) program, a highly sophisticated battle-management system designed to shield the carrier from attack. Utilizing an array of sensor fusion computers, the THADD system integrates on-board radar, sonar, and laser systems with its weapons, utilizing recent and real-time overhead sat-data in order to assess enemy threats. Coordinated multi-static radar make it impossible for enemy stealth aircraft or cruise missiles to penetrate undetected, while its multi-tasking parallel computers can assign priorities and engage incoming targets in the blink of an eye. In addition to its guns, torpedoes, and a full suite of chaff and flares designed to decoy incoming missiles, the two *Ticonderogas* are also equipped with Tomahawk cruise missiles--long-range projectiles capable of destroying targets up to a thousand miles away.

The United States maintains twelve carrier battle groups, usually deploying only two or three at any given time. In addition to its conventional weapons, the *Ronald Reagan* is the first aircraft carrier in more than a decade to carry a limited number of nuclear warheads, a policy change dictated by Russia and China's recent push in the nuclear arms race, spurred on by the United States' insistence on moving ahead with its own Missile Defense Shield.

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Captain Hatcher makes his way into the Combat Information Center (CIC), the heavily air-conditioned confines of the darkened chamber quickly cooling his sweaty, half-naked physique. A dozen technicians glance up from their computer screens as the CO walks by. Hatcher takes a quick look around, then spots his executive officer, Commander Shane Strejcek.

“XO, have you seen Bob Lawson?”

“The Congressman? Yes, sir, he was speaking with Commander Jackson about ten minutes ago.”

Hatcher proceeds to the central alcove of sensor consoles that encircle a large high-resolution plexiglass digital display in map mode, depicting the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea. The carrier battle group’s position and surrounding defense-zones are color-coded in fluorescent-blue, her aircraft in pulsing green, the topography of Europe and West Africa in steady red. Within the multi-layered transparent display, both ocean conditions or atmospheric weather status could be shown.

Commander Rochelle “Rocky” Jackson looks up from her sonar console as her CO approaches, tufts of her short, straw-colored blonde hair peaking out from beneath the navy baseball cap. “Nice legs, Hatch.”

The heavy air conditioning is causing Rocky’s nipples to press against the inside of her tee-shirt. Hatcher catches himself staring. “Commander, what are you doing

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working at a station?”

“Ensigns Soderblom and Dodds are out with the flu. You looking for Congressman Lawson?”

“I take it I just missed him.”

“By a good twenty minutes. I tried to entertain him. Guess he got bored.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t from the view. If you’re cold, Commander, I can get you a sweater.”

She smirks, buttoning her jacket, her hazel eyes sparkling in the console’s glow.

“I’m fine. Thank you, sir.”

Hatcher leans down, whispering in her ear. “By the way, Commander, happy birthday.”

Her high cheekbones swell with a smile. She turns back to face the sonar screen.

“Go away,” she whispers to her husband, “I’m on duty, and you smell. As for Lawson, try Vulture’s Row.”

“Thanks.”

Rocky watches Hatcher leave the Command Center, the sight of the sweat lines running down the crack of his gray Navy-issue shorts causing her to grin.

Commander Rochelle Megan Jackson made her entry into this world thirty-four years and seven hours ago at the Army Base Medical Center in Fort Benning, Georgia. Fully anticipating the arrival of a son, her father, Michael “Bear” Jackson, then a Lt.

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Colonel with the elite United States Rangers, nevertheless presented his newborn with a baseball glove, football, and his own father's first name, Rocky, which her mother immediately changed on the birth certificate to Rochelle.

Rocky would be an only child, the product of an interracial, interservice marriage. Her father, whom she affectionately called "Papa Bear," was career Army all the way. The Bear was a barrel-chested light-skinned African American with a short-cropped auburn Afro and broad smile, who had earned his nickname during his years as a commando in the Army's Special Forces. Those who served under him knew his bark was worse than his bite, Jackson's gruff personality hiding a deep loyalty toward his men. Rocky's mother, Judy, on the other hand, was as quiet as the Bear was loud. A white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, Judy had earned her engineering degree at M.I.T., and had been heavily recruited by the United States Navy. She would meet her future husband in Washington, D.C. during a week long munitions convention.

Rocky Jackson might as well have enlisted at birth.

Growing up on a military base with other Army "brats," Rocky soon began displaying her father's overly competitive spirit. The fair-headed tomboy not only challenged her male classmates on the athletic fields, but more often than not came out the victor. Much of her "need to exceed" attitude was intended to please Papa Bear, who could always be found hooting and hollering from the little league bleachers, that is, when he wasn't traveling abroad on some covert mission.

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While her father's "Special Forces mentality" gave Rocky an edge in athletics, her overly competitive attitude did not mix well in her social life. As she blossomed into adolescence, the beautiful blonde teen with the cocoa skin and Jackie Joyner-Kersey physique often intimidated guys and girls alike. Even when she did date, her no-nonsense attitude toward sex quickly earned her a reputation as a prude. This was not to say that Rocky didn't have the usual adolescent desires--it was just that she was picky. To whomever she might eventually give herself would have to be able to match up with Papa Bear, and none of the so-called "hotshots" at her high school ever did. When her prom date, the school's starting tail back, decided to push things a bit too far on the dance floor, she calmly reared back and punched the high school all-American in the face, her powerful well-practiced Taekwondo jab shattering his nose.

Though Rocky's physical prowess and leadership style may have reflected the personality of her father, her academic pursuits were strictly guided by her mother, herself a former engineering student. After graduating with honors from the Naval Academy, Rocky entered M.I.T's engineering school, her advanced degree eventually leading to a high-ranking position in the Naval Undersea Warfare Engineering Center (NUWC), in Keyport, Washington.

The military was Rocky's life, but she had no desire to command in the field. As the Gulf War had demonstrated, technology was the key to America's dominance as a world power, and Rocky wanted to ride the wave that guaranteed her country's freedom

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for decades to come. Her ego-driven career goal was simple: She would immerse herself in as many new hyper-advanced technologies available, learning all she could from the country's top engineers, and rub elbows with all her father's "muckety-muck" friends in the Pentagon until the opportunity came to oversee one of the Navy's new high tech weapon systems.

Her opportunity would come following several long years working on the Navy's new SSN *Virginia-class* attack sub. George W. Bush's victory had pushed the space-based missile defense shield to the top of the White House's military wish-list. Only six months later, the defection of Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords from the Republican Party returned control of the Senate to the Democrats, threatening to send the high-tech, high cost defense initiative back into development hell. A new project was needed, something more feasible and easier to digest financially, while still packing a wallop regarding America's national security.

Enter the GOLIATH Project, a top-secret venture carrying a price tag in excess of \$10 billion dollars. Unlike SDI, this would be an offensive machine developed by NUWC, a machine capable of altering the strategy of America's Armed Forces for decades to come--and she was the top candidate in line for the directorship.

Three months later it was made official: Rochelle Jackson had become the most powerful woman in this man's armed forces.

Less than a year later, her father, now a General in the United States Special

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Operations Command (USSOCOM), would introduce her to his finest recruit, U.S. Army Captain Gunnar Wolfe, a detachment commander in the elite U.S. Army Rangers. It was in this dark-haired, gray-eyed commando that Rocky Jackson would finally meet her match. Gunnar, an engineering major from Penn State, had been given leave from the field to complete his work on an original design for a remotely operated mini-sub. Believing the vessel's design was compatible with his daughter's program, the Bear had arranged for Gunnar's transfer to NUWC.

For the first two months, they had fought like cats and dogs, Naval engineer versus Army commando--Rocky always hell-bent on keeping the new recruit under her thumb, Gunnar refusing to bend under his beautiful OIC's fiery will. Project deadlines pushed them closer together, the long days eventually softening the blows, allowing their mutual attraction toward one another to take root. The lab quickly became the forum for late night dinners, their romance becoming more physical with each encounter. Competition took a backseat to passion, their lovemaking becoming a game of one-upmanship, more lust than love.

Somewhere along the journey, something much deeper blossomed.

Gunnar Wolfe had bridled the Bear's bucking bronco, an ego-driven woman whose beauty and passion matched her strength and competitive desires. A spring wedding was announced, plans hastily accelerated after Rocky discovered she was six-weeks pregnant. The happy couple even found their dream house--a 4,500 square foot

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waterfront home a few miles west of Seattle.

It was shortly after their engagement that her fiancée began acting strangely, as if he was harboring some dark secret. Their free time together lessened as Rocky's trips to the Pentagon increased, Gunnar spending many a lonely night in his lab.

And then, two weeks before their wedding date, Gunnar committed an unforgivable act of treason that broke her heart and changed both their lives forever.

Arriving home from an extended stay in D.C., Rocky learned a computer virus had been downloaded into the terminals housing all of her project's top-secret schematics. Years of work and countless man hours had been eradicated in an instant. Worse, David Paniagua, the boy-genius in charge of the project's nano-technology (and Gunnar's best man) reported that two billion dollars worth of biochemical nano-computer circuitry were missing, along with a five-year harvest worth of bio-engineered silicon-coated bacteria.

The Department of Defense was devastated by the setback. An internal investigation, following on the heels of the acts of espionage discovered at Los Alamos, forced the Navy to shut down the entire project until the spy or spies could be identified and apprehended.

The culprit had broken into the Artificial Intelligence lab sometime around midnight. Security records revealed only one person had been in the Warfare Center's A-I division at the time--Gunnar Wolfe.

Within days, the Naval Investigative Service (NIS) found evidence of an off-shore

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bank account in Gunnar's father's name. Recent deposits from another off-shore bank were traced to Hong Kong, the account totaling just over \$1.2 million dollars. Although he denied any knowledge of the money or the stolen computer parts, a lie detector test clearly indicated the former war hero was hiding something from his superiors.

Gunnar was arrested in his lab by NIS agents two days before their wedding day. Because there was evidence indicating Gunnar had "sold" the schematics to another government, prosecutors were forced to reduce the charges of espionage to destruction of government resources. On June 22, a month after they were to have been married, a court-marshal jury of staff rank Naval officers found Gunnar Wolfe guilty, the Judge (an Admiral) sentencing him to ten years in Leavenworth.

Six weeks later, the Republicans lost the White House, in no small part due to the Goliath debacle. Within months, the new President would officially cancel the project altogether.

Rocky was devastated. Her life's work, her career goals, her future with the one man to whom she had pledged her love--everything was gone. Worse yet, Gunnar's selfish, inexplicable act had disgraced her forever in the eyes of her peers. Rocky Jackson, a woman who practically draped herself in the American flag, had allowed herself to fall for a man who had stabbed his own country in the back.

The pain was all-consuming, as if her heart had been torn from her chest, her mind from her skull. She felt used. She felt dirty. Weeks later, she would lose the baby.

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It was the final straw, too much even for her own super-strength ego to handle.

Three months after Gunnar began serving time, the Bear found his daughter lying unconscious on the bathroom floor, having overdosed on muscle relaxants and barbiturates. It was the first time in her life she had ever cried out for help. It had nearly been her last.

Months of private counseling eventually replaced Rocky's emptiness with a simmering rage that could explode at any time. Medication made her ill, and a family vacation in Europe only made things worse. The Bear knew his daughter's collapsed mental state had to be rebuilt, brick by patriotic brick. This required discipline, something the service could provide. While Bear had made sure the military had no knowledge of his daughter's drug overdose, he also knew a return to the Warfare Center was out.

"What about active duty?" her mother inspired, prodding her stubborn husband.

Pulling a few strings, the Bear set his wife's plan into motion. Six months later, Rocky began her first assignment on-board the *Aegis* guided missile cruiser, *Princeton*, working as a sonar officer.

The change of pace was exactly what the girl needed to solidify her toehold on sanity. Life aboard an American warship was challenging, and challenges brought out the best in Rochelle Megan Jackson. Her ego demanded that no man would ever outwork her, out-know her, or out-accomplish her. Within a month, she felt like her old self again. By the end of her first tour, her CO recognized her as one of the most reliable officers on his

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boat.

Three years and a promotion later, Commander Jackson earned herself a tour of duty aboard the *USS Ronald Reagan*, the newest carrier in the fleet.

It was here that the former NUWC Director met Captain James Hatcher, a man twenty-five years her senior. Hatch's first wife had passed away only a year before from a long siege by breast cancer, his sorrow making him a kindred spirit of sorts. What began as a friendship gradually nurtured itself into a physical relationship before either of them cared to notice. Worried that his career could be jeopardized by the potential "sex scandal," Hatcher asked Rocky to marry him.

She surprised even herself by saying yes.

Friends gossiped that Rocky was merely seeking out a father figure, and perhaps they were right. Hatch was far from the man of her dreams, but she saw in him a good person, a stable companion, one who would not betray her fragile capacity for trust. He was also an officer on the rise, something not to be taken lightly. Rocky yearned to get back into the spotlight of her former high status, and Captain James Hatcher, the skipper of the flagship of the American Navy, could help lead the way. Despite vigorous protests from her father, the two married.

During that same week, Leavenworth experienced a prison uprising that left two men dead and the warden held hostage. As correctional emergency response teams rushed onto the scene, a lone convict—a former U.S. Army Ranger—had intervened to save

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the warden's life.

After a crescendo of media-manufactured publicity, Gunnar's heroic act led to an early Presidential parole. Having served five years and seven months, the former Ranger Captain and NUWC traitor walked out of military prison a free man--and promptly disappeared from public scrutiny.

After honeymooning in Key West, Captain Hatcher and his new bride boarded the *Ronald Reagan*, the carrier's fleet bound for the Mediterranean. Though Naval rules prevented Rocky and Hatch from "officially" bunking together, she nevertheless enjoyed their time together at sea. Reveling at having access to the Navy's most advanced gadgetry, she quickly mastered all the ship's sensor arrays. Her equipment scanned a volume of airspace out to several hundred miles around the battle group, while equally able to pinpoint and identify any underwater object approaching the armada for more than twenty miles from her ship.

And while she admitted to herself that she wasn't exactly "in love" with Hatch, she did love and respect him, and after all, wasn't that just as important?

For the first time since she could remember, Rocky Jackson actually felt happy.

* * *

The blips on the sonar screen become hazy. Rocky rubs the fatigue from her eyes, then massages the knots in her shoulders. *Two more hours, then dinner and a shower.*

Maybe Hatch'll even let me stay in his cabin tonight.

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For a long moment she stares at her reflection in the orange monitor, thinking about what her life could have been. The thought tweaks a distant memory.

Gunnar had never liked the carrier's Aegis defense shield. Though virtually impregnable to attack on the open ocean, the multi-layered, multi-ship system possessed one basic flaw--its active radar and sonar also revealed its presence to the enemy.

Rocky shakes her head, annoyed at herself for wasting time thinking about the man who had nearly destroyed her. Adjusting her headphones, she refocuses her attention on the sonar monitor,

--a valuable premonition dying still-born.

* * *

Captain Hatcher finds the Congressman on Vultures Row, an open-air balcony overlooking the flight deck, positioned high up on the carrier's island infrastructure. The two watch intently as a Joint Strike Fighter is secured to one of the catapults. The electro-mechanical slingshot, the first of its kind to replace the venerable steam method, is capable of tossing a pick-up truck a half mile out to sea.

With a high-pitched roar, the JSF leaps across the suddenly small flight deck, accelerating from zero to 150 miles per hour in less than two seconds. The required 3.5 gees is ramped up in a calibrated 75 milliseconds by the sophisticated new catapult design, pushing its crew back into their seats with a force of over three-and-a-half times

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their own body weight.

The skipper waits briefly for the roar to die down. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Lawson.” Hatcher is not really sorry, nor does he sound it.

The Democrat from Florida turns to face him. “I don’t need a babysitter, Captain, any more than you need a civilian looking over your shoulder. Keep in mind I’m only here because the Appropriations Committee and GAO still haven’t come to any definitive conclusions regarding funding for the new Stealth Carrier.”

“The CVX’s design speaks for itself. The advances in deck management alone make the new carrier worth funding.”

“Your opinion. Personally, I’m still not convinced it’s worth all the money.”

Hatcher’s face turns red. “Take a good look down there, Congressman. You’re looking at the most dangerous piece of real estate in the world. Maybe you ought to climb into a jump suit and spend some time on our flight deck before you cast your vote.”

“This has never been a question about safety, Captain, it’s a question of whether the ungodly costs associated with keeping these armadas at sea is still worth it. Twenty billion to build a single carrier group, another twelve billion a year just to keep all our CVBGs operational.”

“Maintaining a forward presence isn’t cheap.”

“Yes, but is it still our best strategy? As research into new high tech systems accelerates, delaying purchases even a few more years may yield a full generation of

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advantages. Why waste money on systems that may become obsolete before we even put them into service? There's a growing consensus among my colleagues on Capitol Hill that the carrier groups have become antiquated. Face it, Captain, Aegis may protect your ship in open waters, but at close range, these new Chinese Silkworms and Russian supersonic missiles become too fast and too maneuverable to intercept. The evil empire's gone, Hatcher. Our new enemies lurk in tight, coastal hot-spots like the Straits of Hormuz. What good is a brand-new \$6 billion dollar aircraft carrier if we're afraid to use it?"

Hatcher removes his cap, wiping the sweat from his receding hairline. "Tell you what, Congressman--if you and your colleagues on Capitol hill know a better way of kicking some third world dictator's ass halfway across the globe, then I suggest you fund it--otherwise, give us what we need to do our goddam jobs."

*Atlantic Ocean:
197 Nautical Miles due west of the Strait of Gibraltar
850 feet below the surface:*

16:48 hours

The beast slows, the luminescent glow from its blood-red eyes violating the otherwise ebony depths. A disturbance stirs the bottom silt as a dozen life-forms emerge, as if birthed, from the creature's dark underbelly. Moving ahead, they hover in formation, their own red eyes blazing green in the abyss as they await instructions from

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their parent.

The devilfish settles gently on the ocean floor, displacing half an acre of sand and debris. A bio-electrical impulse is transmitted.

The monster's brood races ahead to attack the approaching fleet.

* * *

Rocky Jackson jumps at the sudden flurry of whistles and clicks. She adjusts her headphones and stares at the SQR-19's sonar monitor.

"What do you hear?" Her XO, Commander Strejcek, asks.

"Ambient sounds, sir, but they weren't there a second ago."

Strejcek picks up a headset and listens. "Hmm, biologics. Sound like Orca."

Strejcek points to the blips on the sonar monitor. Twelve dots disperse, spreading out in formation across the screen. "They're hunting. Watch--the pod will surround the school of fish, then blast them with echolocation, stunning them and driving them to the surface. Saw it on the *Discovery Channel* last month. Extraordinary creatures."

Strejcek walks away, obviously satisfied with his own conclusion.

Fish? I don't hear any fish? Rocky presses the headphones tighter to her ears, then maxes out the volume. The clicks reverberate in greater clarity.

A quick glance at her sensors--the *Jacksonville* is moving to periscope depth. Rocky engages the spread spectrum stealth communicator and its conformal phased-array antenna and sends out a tightly beamed encrypted message. She waits, hoping the sub's

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antenna has come out of the water.

JACKSONVILLE--PLEASE CONFIRM IDENTIFICATION OF OBJECTS.

The small objects disperse, the first five closing rapidly on the keels of the CVBG's forward vessels. Rocky waits, nibbling on her unpolished fingernails, alarm gathering viscerally within her.

A message appears. **BIOLOGICS. CLASSIFICATION: ORCA.**

She stares at her console as four of the "Orcas" move directly beneath the *Ronald Reagan's* keel. The creatures slow, as if drawn to the carrier's propellers.

Then she hears it--very faint--masked beneath the noise coming from the fleet's screws.

The sound of small hydro-propulsion engines. . .

"Commander, something's not right--" She turns.

Strejcek is gone.

The explosions toss her from her chair, slamming her face-first into the console.

Aboard the U.S.S. Jacksonville:

The sonar technician turns to his supervisor, the twenty year old ensign's face pale. "Multiple explosions, sir. Sounds like heavy damage. Jesus, the carrier's taking on water--"

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The *Jacksonville's* sonar supervisor grabs the 1-MC, his heart pounding in his chest. "Conn, sonar-- multiple torpedoes in the water! Bearing one-zero-five, range eight-thousand yards. Torpedoes are Chinese, SET-53s. Sir, two of the torpedoes have acquired the *Hampton*."

"Battle-stations! Officer of the Deck, come to course one-seven-zero."

Commander Kevin O'Rourke's skin tingles, as if he is about to step off a precipice. He turns to his Diving Officer as a dozen more men rush to take positions in the control room. "Dive, make your depth six hundred feet. Weapons, get me a firing solution--"

The weapons supervisor sounds stunned. "Trying, sir, but nothing's coming up on the BSY-1--"

"Conn, sonar, I'm picking up a flurry of cavitation. . .it's coming from the sea floor, two-thousand yards dead ahead. Sir, something massive just rose off the bottom--"

"Right full rudder, all ahead flank--"

"Conn, sonar, two torpedoes in the water! Bearing, one-seven-zero, coming straight at us--"

"Change course, come to two-seven-zero, thirty degrees down on the fairwater planes."

Helmsman Mike Schultz is seventeen and fresh out of high school, a junior sailor piloting a 6,900-ton, nuclear-powered attack sub. Schultz wipes the sweat from his palms, then pushes down on the steering wheel before him, maneuvering the *Jacksonville's*

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fairwater planes, which protrude like small wings from the submarine's sail.

“Launch countermeasures, both launchers.”

The Chief repeats the Captain's orders.

“Conn, sonar, one of the torpedoes fell for the countermeasures, the other two fish have acquired and are homing. Bearing two-one-zero, best range twelve-hundred yards--”

“Launch the NAE. Reload both launchers with ADC's. Helm, right full rudder--”

“Conn--sonar, torpedoes still with us. . .six-hundred yards. . .impact in sixty seconds.”

The perceived temperature within the suddenly claustrophobic steel chamber is rising.

Petty Officer Third Class Leonard Cope stares at his console, fighting to breathe, sweat dripping on his monitor. “Conn, sonar, torpedo impact in thirty seconds--”

“Rig ship for impact--”

“Conn, sonar, I've got a bearing, very faint--”

“Identify--”

“No known registry on the computer data base, but goddam this thing's big.”

“Firing point procedures--Sierra One, ADCAP torpedo. Make tubes one and two ready in all respects.”

“Aye, sir. Tubes one and two ready in all respects.”

“Solution ready,” the XO reports.

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“Weapons ready. Thirty-five percent fuel remaining, run-to-enable two-five-hundred yards.”

“Ready--shoot!”

Two Mk-48 Advanced Capability wire-guided torpedoes spit out from the *Jacksonville*'s bow, homing in on the unknown aggressor.

“WEPS, release countermeasures, come to course three-one-zero--”

Petty Officer Cope grabs his headphones as an explosion tears at his eardrums. Then he hears something he has never heard before--the frightening *crunch* of an imploding steel hull. A heavy pulse of structural vibrations shudders the *Jacksonville*. Power flickers off. Emergency lights illuminate the frightened faces of the junior members of the crew, hyperventilating at their stations.

“Conn, sonar, sir, that explosion. . . it was the *Hampton*”

“Skipper, contact has launched two more torpedoes, both active--”

Two-hundred and fifty yards to the west, the *Jacksonville*'s two Mk-48 ADCAP torpedoes have slowed to forty knots. On-board sonars ping, searching the sea for the enemy contact, the weapon's real-time computers sending highly processed data back to the sub via a trailing fiber-optic wire.

Two consecutive returns. The torpedoes accelerate, pinging faster--
--before slamming nose-first into two anti-torpedo torpedoes.

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The concussion wave from the double detonations sends reverberations through the *Jacksonville's* interior hull, as it rolls the submarine hard to port.

“Conn, ship’s own were struck by anti-torpedo torpedoes! Both ADCAPS destroyed--”

Captain O’Rourke stares at his XO, a cold chill running down his spine. His sub, one of the finest in the world, has been outgunned and outmaneuvered.

“Skipper, incoming torpedo! Impact in ten seconds--”

“Brace for impact!”

A resounding double explosion from beneath the hull cracks open the *Jacksonville's* keel. A massive jolt - the sub suddenly blanketed in suffocating darkness. Shouts, screams, and yells rise above an insane chaos of shearing metal and ripping bulkheads. Steam bursts from unseen pipes. A shower of sparks illuminates a gallery of ghostly faces--petrified, confused, their shattered minds screaming in the terror of one final, unified thought-- *I'm going to die--* as Death reaches for them.

It breaks through the hull with sonic speed, crushing its victims with an icy embrace.

Aboard the USS Ronald Reagan:

Captain Hatcher rushes into the Command Information Center, grabbing hold of a console as his ship lurches beneath him. “Report!”

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Rocky Jackson stands. “It was a series of underwater munitions, four in all, very powerful. Totally blew out three of the four props and compromised both layers of the hull’s torpedo-protection system. The engine room’s taking on water, with water already reported as high as deck four--”

“My God. . .” Hatcher feels the blood drain from his face. *An American Super carrier sinking? Impossible. . .*

“Sir, it’s not just us, the entire fleet’s under attack, and I’ve lost contact with both subs.”

“Goddam it.” Hatcher looks around. “Where the hell’s Strejcek?”

“I don’t know.”

“Commander, order everyone but the catapult and Pri-Fly crews on deck. Launch as many birds as you can while we still have electricity for the catapults--”

A groan of metal drowns out Hatcher’s last order. The ship’s steel plates wail in protest, straining to support the floundering carrier’s rising bow.

“Hatch--”

“I need to get to the SSES. You have your orders, Commander.” Hatcher grabs the watertight door of the CIC to keep from falling, then turns to face his wife. “Rocky, get your team out on deck--now!”

Two decks up in Pri-Fly (Primary Flight Control), Air-boss James “Big Jim”

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Kimball and his mini-boss, Kevin Lynam bark out commands to their LSOs (Landing Signal Officers), who are frantically working on the flattop six stories below. The control tower is electric with activity. Kimball, the choreographer for the chaotic jet-fighter ballet taking place on the flight deck, is demanding his crew launch no less than twenty aircraft within the next six minutes, an impossibility from which he refuses to back down.

“Heads up on deck. Get ready to shoot Hornets five, six, and seven. Clear shoot lines. Clear catwalk--”

Beneath a turbulent atmosphere of noise and exhaust, four-hundred men and women attired in team colors scramble across a lurching flight deck that has suddenly become more carnival ride than airport runway.

Twenty-year-old Ensign Rogelio Duron swears luridly in staccato Spanish as he tugs the parking blocks from the front tire of a Joint Strike Fighter--then screams as he is lifted off his feet and sucked head-first into the engine inlet, blood and brain matter spraying the deck.

Kimball slams the control tower window with a futile fist. “Goddam sonuva bitch!” The Air Boss looks up to see an air wing returning from the east. “Shit--Kevin, get those two CSA’s in the air before our Tomcats start dropping out of the fucking sky.”

Below deck, frightened catapult technicians rush about in ankle deep water as they hurriedly reset each cable, near panic with the horrible realization that they are involved in a high stakes game of Russian roulette. Communication between the flight-

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deck crews and the tower is coming in too fast; it is just a matter of minutes before another deadly mistake happens. Precise pre-launch pressure loads must be fine-tuned to each aircraft's weight, but there is no time for the usual measurement—nominal values being hurriedly guessed and set manually. Settings too low will fling a pilot and his aircraft straight into the water, too high and its structure will fail.

Circling the melee is the E-2C Hawkeye Early Warning Aircraft, identifiable by its flat radar rotodome affixed horizontally atop its fuselage. Within the air-watcher, a team of operators use the APS-145 radar to organize the returning jet fighters' mid-air refueling. From the Hawkeye's cockpit, pilots and co-pilots stare in disbelief at the surreal disaster taking place below--warship after American warship sinking with inglorious rapidity beneath the lead-gray waters of the Atlantic.

Back on the carrier, another Joint Strike Fighter races down the runway as the bow of the *Ronald Reagan* heaves upward from the sea like a breaching humpback. The JSF pilot veers off the rising deck, airborne, until the dark ocean rushes up at him and his jet smashes nose-first into a ten-foot swell.

Jim Kimball sees the runway splinter as sections of the fractured prow fall back into the water. "That's it, everyone out! Everyone on deck in life-preservers on the double!"

Rocky Jackson grabs an orange flotation vest from an officer, then hurries out on deck. "Has anyone seen the skipper?" She turns to the officer directing the crew into the

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lifeboats. “O’Malley, have you seen--”

Shrapnel rains down upon her, a fragment of hot metal grazing her forehead as a helicopter blade shatters across the heaving deck, the rotor craft bursting in flames.

Men race to save the pilot.

Rocky is in a daze. “O’Malley, where’s the skipper?”

“You’re bleeding, Jackson, now get in the goddam boat!”

Strong arms lift her into the life raft.

“Screw this, I gotta find Hatch!” Rocky jumps out of the life raft, reenters the superstructure, and races down a listing gray corridor in search of her husband.

* * *

The water has reached Captain Hatcher’s waist by the time he enters the Ships Signals Exploitation Space, a top-secret chamber containing data links to all national and theater-level intelligence systems. The SSES anteroom is dark, the ship’s power out.

Hatcher stumbles across three bodies, two officers and an MP. All floating face down. All dead.

“Admiral?” Hatcher rolls Brian Decker over, blood pouring from several bullet wounds. “Oh, Jesus. . .” He glances up at a flashlight’s beacon coming from within the SSES operations room, his security reflexes taking over.

Hatcher removes the sidearm still holstered to the dead MP. He sloshes forward, peering into the high-level security chamber.

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Commander Shane Strejcek lurks by a computer terminal. Images flash rapidly across the screen, a remote palm-sized device attached to the hard drive downloading the sensitive data.

“Strejcek? What the hell are you doing?”

The XO turns. An explosion of heat slams Hatcher back against the far wall, a warm wave of blood pouring down his shirt, quenching the fire burning in his chest as a numbing paralysis sends him slipping to his knees in the crimson water.

Strejcek approaches, Hatcher unable to raise the gun from the water. He has no strength to move, let alone speak.

Strejcek stares serenely at his dying commander. “I’m sorry, skipper, but I serve a higher calling.”

* * *

Ignoring the cold water paralyzing her lower torso, and the stream of warm blood oozing from her forehead, Rocky wades through the flooded corridor, the torrent rising fast, the fluorescent bulbs above her head flickering, threatening to plunge her into darkness. “Hatch?” She enters the open SSES chamber, then rushes forward, crying out as she sees him.

“Hatch!” Rocky clutches her husband’s lifeless torso to her chest, his blood pouring out across her life jacket. She holds his head above water, her right hand brushing against the pistol he is clutching, even in death. “Oh God, Hatch--”

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Looking up, she sees Strejcek. “Shane, help me--”

Strejcek is caught-off guard. “Rocky, what are you doing here?”

“Help me, God dammit, someone shot--” She stares at the gun barrel pointed at her head. “You?” She feels for the weapon in her husband’s hand, now underwater.

“You should have abandoned ship.” Strejcek bends over and reaches for her with his free hand.

In one motion Rocky leaps to her feet and jams the muzzle of the MP’s gun into Strejcek’s open mouth. “Drop the gun!”

Strejcek complies.

Her teeth chatter against the cold, her hand shaking with emotion. She removes the muzzle from her superior’s mouth, mustering one adrenaline packed syllable. “Why?”

Strejcek exhales. “You’re so beautiful, Rocky, but you’re so blind. The world has cancer, and you’re still in the denial stage.”

The ship lurches beneath them. Strejcek pushes her aside, diving for his weapon.

Unfazed, she fires.

A wad of blood and brain tissue splatters against the far wall as the boat’s traitorous second-in-command falls backward with a splash.

Before she can catch a breath, the Super-carrier is wrenched to starboard beneath her, as if tugged by the hand of Poseidon. Rocky tumbles sideways, regains her footing, then leaps into the heaving corridor, head-on into a wave of rushing water.

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Jesus...this isn't happening. . .

The sea races through the inclined passageway like a raging creek, the torrent dragging her with it. Gasping and kicking, Rocky endeavors to grab a ceiling pipe, succeeds, then arm walks the chasm like a mountain climber dangling from a rope bridge as she drags herself toward the diminishing light at the end of the tunnel.

Don't stop. . .

The cold water saps her strength, yet her world-filling anger refuses to allow her any rest. The sea is rising at her from behind as the ship groans a final tocsin warning of her impending death. Her fingers numb, her hands too frozen to maintain a controlled grip, Rocky stubbornly continues to ascend, her feet slipping wildly on the slick steel walls.

Ducking through a knee-knocker, she fights to maintain equilibrium as an intersecting current sideswipes her from the galley.

Don't stop, don't think, just go faster. . .

The boat rolls again, its bow rising, sending a four-foot wall of water racing straight for her--

Rocky grabs the pipes, sucks in a desperate breath and ducks as the swell buries her, pounding her chest as it hurtles down the passage. She opens her eyes, shivering from the cold, then climbs faster, the daylight winking at her, teasing her from a dismaying thirty feet above her head.

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A minute later she emerges from the open hatch, the gray sky rolling away as the deck heaves backward, threatening to send her spilling back into the corridor. She leaps sideways, then screams, dropping to her belly as an F/A-18E Super Hornet slides sideways across the tilting tarmac, its mangled bulk threatening to crush her. She covers her head, squeezing her eyes shut as the wreckage passes over her and crashes into the flight deck's tower, now pitching backward as the carrier's failing buoyancy yields its weight to the sea.

Rocky crawls out from under some trailing debris, her fingers creating indentations in the soft top layer of the torn deck as she moves toward the rising port-side rail. Dodging yet another avalanche of debris, she grabs onto one of the carrier's now-loose retractable antennas as the deck climbs to an angle too steep to even kneel upon.

Reaching up, she pulls herself to the rail and peers over the edge.

Oh, God. . .

The pitching sea is eight stories below but nowhere to be seen, concealed beneath the carrier's keel, which is now rising from the sea like a glistening steel whale poised to eat her.

Unable to jump, she holds on, praying for the ship to stop rolling. Shaking uncontrollably, she closes her eyes to shut out the vertigo and the wail of tortured metal, her trembling hand reflexively wiping the blood crusted on her half frozen brow.

The carrier stops rotating—and suddenly drops like an elevator. Rocky holds on as

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water splashes across her face and the sea rushes up from below.

Now! She inflates the life vest, climbs upon the listing rail and leaps.

The cold wind rushes past her ears until she plunges feet-first into the roaring ocean, sinking like an anchor. Physics takes over and the vest's buoyancy halts her descent at twenty feet. Kicking and paddling, she fights her way back to the surface, the frothy layer appearing so close, yet always an arm's distance away.

Finally her head pops free, somehow slipping into a valley between swells. The rolling ocean lifts and drops her, the nausea overwhelming her stomach and head. A current tugs at her from behind. Turning, she is horrified to witness the *Ronald Reagan's* superstructure slip beneath the waves, expelling its last dying belch as it disappears into the vortex created by its own descent into the unforgiving sea.

A steel-cold current of choking brine reaches out and grabs her. Panicking, she starts swimming, but the vortex is too strong, sucking her backward as it inhales her within its fury. Ocean swells become mountainous barriers, rising higher as she spins faster.

Too strong. . .

Rocky sucks in a last desperate breath as the cavitation of the displaced mass of the carrier snatches her about the waist and drags her below.

She kicks and paddles in protest, wasting precious air as she fights to swim upstream against the maelstrom, the unfathomable suction spinning above the now-

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submerged wreckage.

Forty feet. . . her diving watch displays, unheeded.

Her pulse pounds in her ears.

Sixty feet. . . sinister pressure assaults her ear drums as her limbs turn to lead.

Eighty feet, forty seconds, thirty-one years. . . and still she is plummeting, ever downward.

How deep can a human go and survive on a single breath of air? She remembers seeing specials on free-diving and wills herself not to waste precious energy by fighting.

The haunting sounds of the depths envelope her. Rocky pinches her nose and blows, attempting to rid the pain from her ears. She looks down, falling feet-first into the deep blue sea. Far below, the *Ronald Reagan* groans back at her as the once-mighty vessel disappears into murky shadows, approaching its final resting place.

Please let me go. . .

One minute. . . the pressure dragging her below easing only slightly, the pinch in her ears now daggers.

One hundred twenty feet. . . still falling, strength and resolve diminishing with every foot.

One fifty, her throat and chest on fire.

At one hundred fifty-eight feet, the carrier releases her.

The air space in Rocky's flotation device has been compressed flat beneath six

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atmospheres of pressure. No longer buoyant, she continues falling, flailing in slow motion, a marionette dancing for Death's amusement before He takes her.

She closes her eyes, her body no longer hers, her mind in a fog, the sea ready to squelch the flames in her lungs. *Pills were easier. Wish I had my pills. No more pain. . . no more gain, no more brain, no more fame, no more blame. Good bye, Mom. Good bye, Papa Bear.*

Something enormous sideswipes her face. Her eyes burst open against the tremendous impact, its brutality jolting her with adrenaline.

A cloud of buoyant debris races up from the sunken carrier.

Willing her arms to move, she reaches for the closest object, misses the first, and then the second. She twists her torso, close to passing out as she aims for a large object rising from below. . .waiting. . . waiting. . . her eyes nearly popping out of their sockets as the object suddenly slams into her gut, her chest exploding as she latches onto the bucking bronco, her nose inhaling seawater, her mouth vomiting it back out.

And still, she refuses to let go.

The object twists in her grip as it pushes her higher, the helicopter tire somehow settling beneath her, driving her to the surface, spinning her as it rises.

Rocky loops both legs and the crook of one arm around the tire, pinching her nose with her free hand as death's pressing blackness continues pushing in on her peripheral vision. A warm feeling fills her chest as she rises higher, the residual molecules of air in

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her lungs expanding, easing the scorching pain. With newfound strength, she grips the wheel's strut tighter, gently expelling air to prevent her lungs from bursting and to keep dissolved nitrogen from forming deadly bubbles in her blood.

The life vest re-expands, nearly pushing her from the tire.

And then the incredible sound of life returns in one mighty *swoosh* as her body is literally launched from the sea. Thrown from the tire, she haltingly inhales a lungful of blessed air, her salt-burned throat heaving with the effort.

Moaning involuntarily, she swims back to the tire and climbs on, hugging it as feeling slowly returns to her oxygen-deprived limbs.

Rising.

Falling.

Hills of water toss her insides about. She vomits seawater, then closes her eyes, her head pounding, her body shivering from the cold. The sound of circling fighters grows louder.

And then she is moving.

Rocky looks up, disoriented. *Am I being rescued?* She blinks hard, her mind unable to grasp what her eyes are seeing.

The tire is caught in the wake of a great beast, its dark, imposing head plowing the surface somewhere up ahead. The brutish silhouette is circling, and now she can see what looks like its eyes, glowing crimson beneath an enormous wake that washes over the

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monster's face.

Oh my God. . .

The mountainous bow wave tosses the surviving crewmen of the *Ronald Reagan* from their rafts, their limbs flailing like a surfer thrown by a breaking wave.

High above, an air wing organizes. Four fighters plunge toward the monster, each enraged pilot intent on slaughtering it. Eight JDAM missiles launch as one, the wave of projectiles homing in on the brute's exposed back.

From the creature's spine, a dozen surface-to-air missiles zoom skyward, blasting apart the Joint Strike Fighters in the blink of an eye--even as the evening sky erupts with the metallic whine from two anti-missile guns, positioned behind the sea creature's head like horns on a devil. A shear wall of steel--four thousand 20-mm shells--meet the JDAMs head-on.

Rocky instinctively ducks, registering the heat from the explosions as she shields her eyes from the inferno.

The remaining fighters race out of range, clearly outmatched.

Unchallenged, the steel nightmare laps its killing field one last time before disappearing beneath the waves, leaving little more than a ripple.

Rocky presses her face against the cold surface of the helicopter wheel, her shattered mind screaming a single thought.

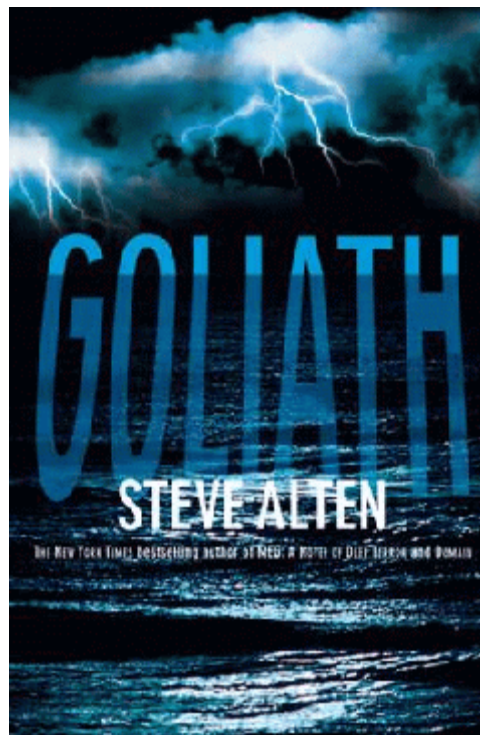
Goliath. . .

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Then a wave of anger grips her like a tortured animal caught in a trap. Purple lips whisper the cursed name of Gunnar Wolfe, her voice rising until she is yelling like a banshee, screeching her venom into the deepening twilight.

GOLIATH will arrive in bookstores in July of 2002.

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