

GOLIATH

Also by Shawn Corridan and Gary Waid

GITMO

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GOLIATH

A NOVEL

SHAWN CORRIDAN AND GARY WAID

 **Oceanview Publishing**
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*To my lovely wife, Julie,
who continues to inspire me, always and forever.*

—Shawn Corridan

*To my wife, Patty,
who must have decided long ago to tolerate my idiosyncrasies.*

*And to my long-dead father, Tom Waid, twenty years
in the Navy, three Bronze Stars for actions in the Pacific.*

—Gary Waid

GOLIATH

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Southern reaches of the Bering Sea

NOVEMBER 26, 0730 AST

THERE IS STILL much to think about. And always I am surprised. After three days at sea, no job could be so grand. I remember the last ship, with drunken Captain Markov and his stinking yellow cat. A pigsty. But this, this is stupendous. I am a child, with the king of the sea under me. I must not forget. At dinner this time I will say, "Yes, Captain, I am Mr. Fyodor Ivanov. This is my honor." And Bennkah, a ship-to-end-all-ships, will be my home.

Aside from the teak and the plush leather and the wealth of electronics, the actual design of the bridge deck was not that different from most modern supertankers. At such an early hour, LEDs from an array of equipment formed a muted, sterile ellipse of information in primary colors. The glow reached into the haze and hollowed Third Officer Ivanov's eyes and cheeks, turning him into a caricature of mariners down through history, seafarers doing their watches by the bells, minding the compass, steering the ship.

Yet in front of Ivanov, as might be expected, there was no binnacle-mounted ship's wheel, but a modern leather-wrapped steering wheel the size of a large dinner plate. It was a symbol, nothing more, moving in miniscule corrections, linked to hydraulics that responded to the instructions of the autopilot, a computerized flux-gate compass system that commanded the synchronized rudders to steer the ship. The system was never wrong. *Bennkah's* pilothouse

was a cathedral of intricate yet simple design, sending and receiving signals to and from every nook and cranny of the ship and all the relevant points of earth, sea, and sky.

Ivanov, weeks ago when he was called up, had decided this was easy work. The on-duty helmsman of such a tanker as *Bennkah* need not touch the controls except to micro adjust or review data. Everything was automated, even the climate. The air inside was warm and comfortable. He had no thick wool coat, only a blue sailor's pullover and a watch cap that displayed the chevrons of his rank. So his job was to be vigilant, intent on the monitors. His eyes ignored the horizon and the icy slush on the windows in front of him. There was nothing to see outside anyway, except the muted, amber shapes of deck lights and a blue-black darkness beyond. And there was nothing to hear, either. The dull thrumming of giant turbines far below blocked out the whistle of the wind and the sounds of whirring wipers slinging ice into an invisible abyss of cold water and colder sky.

He was about to go off watch. His body was stiff from four hours of tedium, doing almost nothing in the face of such an automated marvel of Russian engineering. As far as he was concerned, there could not have ever been such a fantasy as this bridge. The only touch of reality was a child's toy perched on the dash—a plastic bobble head of President Vladimir Putin. The painted likeness was smiling, nodding almost imperceptibly, head going up and down, back and forth in the near-dark shadows.

Reality for Ivanov, then, was not a spaceship bridge deck, but a smiling Putin, nodding up and down, back and forth.

He watched the toy for a moment. Then he, too, rolled his head up and down, side to side, loosening his neck muscles. He'd smoked too many cigarettes, and his mouth tasted of harsh tobacco and too much coffee. He glanced to his left, where his captain, Mr. Nicholas

Borodin, stood, feet apart, eyes forward, hands clasped behind his back. The captain had emerged from his quarters only a few moments ago. Soon, at eight bells, he would take over. The big ship had been traversing the northwestern edge of the shelf known as the Aleutian Bank. They were approaching a course correction that, two hours from now, would take them well into the American side of the Bering Sea proper and then into the ice. It was early, yet the captain always took command in such situations.

The captain took command of every situation.

The captain is a prick, thought Ivanov, smiling to himself. And a puzzle. But I will introduce myself at dinner this time. He will like me.

Third Officer Fyodor Ivanov wasn't alone in his confusions about his captain. Borodin was an enigma—only fifty-six years old, but with a face ravaged by the fatigue of many long seasons at sea. He seemed tired beyond his years. And humorless to a fault. There was no joke telling or sharing a drink with Borodin. The man wore the cloak of command and exuded power and control with every breath. Like his life depended on it.

Maybe it did, thought Ivanov.

Of course, to be selected as captain of such a great ship, newly commissioned in Vladivostok, had to have been quite an honor. Ivanov could not fathom such a job, one that carried with it certain overwhelming responsibilities that would undo most men. He looked away. Just a few more minutes, he thought. Soon he could drag his tired body to bed.

* * *

In the smoky gloom Captain Nicholas Borodin frowned. Deep in thought, he ignored his junior officer. He also ignored the guttural

whispers coming from the rear of the bridge in the section known as the Visitors Lounge, a carpeted arena where wealthy oilmen could watch the operations of such a boat and preen and display their plumage. They could crow at their investment prowess. They were part of the giant Russian oil machine.

Only two men occupied the club seats now, and neither one seemed overly qualified to crow except to each other. They weren't oilmen, they were experts—self-described tech men involved more in the workings of the ship than its cargo. Just arrived from the officers' quarters, they had taken coffee from the steward and were already lacing it with strong vodka in a Russian ceremony as old as the frozen tundra. They leaned their elbows on the varnished hardwood table and drank their Bolshevik coffee from white porcelain mugs. One of them, Chief Engineer Vitrov, a small, round, hairless man afflicted with a skin condition that reddened his face and coarsened his features, was trying to explain something to his companion. Vitrov had been assigned as escort and babysitter for the honored guest earlier that week, but it was a formality. They had known each other from their almost two-year association in Vladivostok.

“Look,” the chief said, taking a large steel ball bearing from his shirt pocket and placing it on the table. It rolled in a slow circle, then made the Sign of the Cross as the ship moved through the sea with an ever so slight pitch and roll.

“Big ship. Good weather. Yes,” he said, grinning.

The other man, younger and full-maned, laughed. He'd been the leader of the design team that had been responsible for creating *Bennkah*. He was a man used to subservience, even if it contained a bit of familiar jocularly. After all, he and the chief were working friends now. He wagged his head in appreciation. “Yes, Mr. Vitrov,” he said. “*My* good ship. And *big*.” He wore the Western-cut clothes of the Russian superrich.

Captain Borodin heard the exchange but chose to ignore it. He had more important things on his mind. The spitting rain and sleet had kept the seas down, although with such tonnage at his command, middling seas were a joke. His concerns were internal, not external. He scanned his monitors, checking for anomalies that might signal a problem.

Everything is normal. Everything is as it should be. Everything is accounted for.

He closed his eyes for a moment. If he were a God-fearing man, he might have prayed, but instead, he turned to his third officer and relieved him.

The ship's clock rang eight bells.

On the dash the bobble-head Vladimir Putin smiled at the captain. It nodded its painted head.

Back and forth, up and down.

Like the Sign of the Cross.

CHAPTER 2

Two hundred miles east, salvage tug Skeleton, Dutch Harbor, Alaska

NOVEMBER 26, 0830 AST

IN NOVEMBER, AND in these latitudes, the cyclical events of daylight and dark were skewed and meaningless. People woke up and traveled to work in the dark. In the late afternoon they went home in the dark. During the day a sun appeared that was often subdued and depressing and lasted for only a few hours. On the docks, the final week of November was a time for the end of things. A time for finishing up the year's work. A time for buttoning up, packing and sealing supplies and equipment in preparation for winter. Many boats were hauled and blocked in yards while others were left afloat to be winterized, engine fluids drained and replaced, hull heaters commissioned and tested. Mountains of fishing gear were carted away to be warehoused and worked on during the months-long cold weather to come. In late November, except for the few hours before and after the meridian, the gloom and the coming of the snow and ice became their life. Soon the season would grip them and would not let go until spring. It was the way things had always been in these latitudes and the way things would remain.

At this late dawn hour, under a phalanx of blue-white halogen lights on the western end of a dilapidated commercial wharf in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, a salvage operation was in progress. The hundred-foot steel salvager *Skeleton*, and its small and tired fifty-five-foot auxiliary, *Bones*, were extracting one of the local fishing trawlers from

the rancid mud of the harbor. The early hour was a function of the tide tables more than anything else. A nine o'clock low tide meant an easier lift, which translated into less strain on the equipment.

This trawler was not one of the big crabbers from the *Deadliest Catch*. It had been many years since this fifty-year-old scow had enjoyed such similar care as its TV-star cousins—care that included regular maintenance schedules.

So the bedraggled forty-six-foot boat that had plied the waters of the Aleutians for all of its life was down on her luck, which was why she had succumbed to a lousy thru-hull fitting two nights ago. When the float switch on her bilge pump failed, she had taken only two hours to sink, settling into the silt of the bottom like a fat old hen squatting on her droppings.

A crowd had gathered to watch the operation, limed by *Skeleton's* halogen glare and back-lighted by a low northern sky featuring scudding belts of black clouds surrounding a bisected northeast sun so steeped in haze that a man could look right at the core and not shade his eyes. The water was also black and uninviting, a telltale of the winter to come, not the locale. During much of the year, Dutch Harbor was picture-postcard beautiful. And even now, if one were to look farther east between the dark hills of the near Aleutians, the mainland slopes of Alaska displayed themselves, blue-gray and indistinct except at their mountainous peaks, where early snow reflected the true value of the subarctic sun in all its glory.

On this date, at the end of the wharf, no muted colors or vaulted heights were appreciated. Down in the harbor, nothing at all seemed to be very glorious or clear. In the worn-but-serviceable wheelhouse of *Skeleton*, Captain Sonny Wade ignored the screeching of the hawsers and the rumbling of the pumps. He looked down at his wheel bench to the framed, water-stained photo of his ex-wife, Judy, the girl he'd loved since high school.

He remembered taking the picture as she stood at the bow of *Skeleton*, his new commission. It had been an earlier, happier time, when they both were excited about the project ahead. Back then the world was theirs to conquer together. No more Sonny working in faraway oceans for foreign companies, no more months away from home tending to other people's successes and failures, working his ass off for little reward. Back then, *Skeleton* and Dutch Harbor had been a lifeboat of sorts to Sonny.

And for that brief moment in time, Judy was still the anchor, the most beautiful person in his life. The picture said it all, even with a dab of paint on her chin and her soft bangs shadowing her eyes, smiling her patented, award-winning smile for the camera.

A hell of a woman.

Four years later she was gone, leaving many things unsaid, abandoning her failing, disgraced Sonny like a bad dream. The old photo was before the fall. It didn't show the disappointment, even horror, that later helped to cloud Judy's expression and put years on her face.

I understand, kiddo, he wanted to tell her. *Nobody in their right mind would have stuck around*. He squinted at the faded shot and tried not to blame her. He wondered where she was. Never a letter, never a call or an e-mail.

Not even to Mary.

Mary, their daughter, now fully grown, whip-smart, disdainful of her mother, doting to her dad. Mary, who stood by him as his beacon, hard and fast among the wreckage of Sonny's life. She was like an angel sometimes. Too damn stubborn, though, and forgiving of him. Her generosity was sure to come back and bite her. Yet even if he knew in his heart she was sacrificing her own happiness for him, he couldn't deny himself the indulgence. He was a frigate bird circling for scraps . . . or signaling a sort of elongated doom in the midst of the gale.

Even now, Mary was hard at work doing the float, out in the thick of things in her fatigued, neoprene diver suit and her hard hat, performing the job at hand, barking commands to the men.

Sonny tore his mind back to the present. He scanned his gauges, then examined the drama outside through scarred windows. He had to get his head in the game. Outside, bit by bit, the gray was giving way. He had a crew to lead, five guys who wanted a paycheck.

Sometimes, though, it wasn't easy. And every year got worse and worse.

From outside, Mary's voice rose above the din. She was shouting for another foot of lift.

Get your head on, Sonny told himself. Do your job.

Sonny crossed over to his starboard control station and took the reins. The ropes of vein and gristle in his forearms bunched and relaxed as he throttled the secondary hoist engine. With his elbow he hit the transmit toggle and raised his mouth to the intercom. "Manny," he said to his engineer behind the wheel of *Bones*, "gimme some room." Then he ordered Cowboy, his first mate, to unloose the reel dog and cable up. In three seconds the wire came tight. When *Bones* drew back on her spring lines, the sunken trawler began to rise.

CHAPTER 3

EVEN AT THIRTY-THREE meters long and twenty-six feet of beam, *Skeleton* listed a few degrees to port as she began to pull several tons of steel and mud and equipment off the bottom of the bay in Dutch Harbor. The small trawler hadn't responded to float bags or pontoons, so Sonny had ordered their four-inch trash pump out of winter mothballs and put his strongest man, an Eskimo named Stu, onto the controls. In the past, the discharge hose had tended to get away from the smaller guys. Not so with Stu.

Then he ordered an airline hooked up to one of the pneumatic ports. He commissioned another of the crew, Tick, dreadlocked and grinning, to don a mask and breather, take a swim, and work the hose down into the aft hold of the trawler. While Tick was busy underwater, Mary also went down into the boat and plugged the vents and thru-holes. Soon mud began to gush away in huge gouts. Air bubbles from *Skeleton's* compressor roiled the silt and aired up the trawler's compartments from the top down. Within an hour the combination began to work. The boat began to rock itself out of the mud, which shifted things around just enough so that cables could do the rest.

Now Mary stood in two inches of water on the trawler's pouring aft deck. She stood in her neoprene suit among twisted wires and toppled fishing gear, hanging onto the rigging with one hand and bending her knees with every surge of energy, as the salvage engines

roared and the cables pinged and the steel groaned. She was a pro, tall and strong like her mother. And damn good-looking. She gave hand signals that told the winch handlers, Cowboy on *Skeleton*, and Second Mate O'Connell on the foredeck of *Bones*, what to do. They, in turn, executed the precise pulls of the two winches so that the boat would remain level as it rose up into the harsh glow of the lights.

Although *Skeleton Salvage* was forced to use older gear, the experienced crew made up for any shortfall. They'd been in the business for a while and worked together well. Sonny knew, though, that they were an odd group of guys. Some might call them misfits, almost a zoo sometimes, or a menagerie. Yet together they sensed the workings of the *Skeleton* as one.

There was Cowboy, wild and strong and quick thinking, a prodigy straight from the Alaskan oil fields.

And good-natured Stu, a native fisherman and strongman once fired by the Alaskan Professional Wrestling Commission for breaking both his opponent's arms in the ring.

The second mate was a self-described southern redneck named O'Connell, who had his Marine ticket and several years of offshore experience in the Gulf of Mexico.

And, of course, there was the lithe and agile Tick, a dreadlocked, white Rastaman nut job with dreams of Jamaica dancing in his head.

Manny kept the equipment working. He was a Mexican émigré and an engineer of the greasy-hands variety, who could take anything apart and make it work. Without Manny, the *Skeleton* would suffer mightily.

But there were always the detractors. Always the people who had to complicate things.

On the dock, among a cluster of idle fishermen—some white, some native—a drunken voice rose above the noise. It was directed at Sonny, who had stepped out onto the wheelhouse landing.

“Hey, Wade, you gonna stink up the place again?”

An empty gin bottle sailed out from the dock and splashed into the water beside the streaming trawler.

From another group of men on the wharf, another taunt shot out over the bay. “Yeah, Wade, what we need’s some more fuckin’ oil on the salt banks!”

Mary, enraged at the assault and at the desecration of a perfect lift operation, cast her eyes over the riffraff and glared up at her father. *Don’t take this shit, Dad*, she seemed to say.

Sonny ignored her. He ignored the taunts and the jeering and the catcalls as he had for years. He stepped back into the wheelhouse and toggled the intercom. “Cowboy, Manny, O’Connell, gimme your readouts one at a time, hydraulic, heat, and oil.”

There was more work to be done. Screw these people. Screw ’em all.

* * *

On the docks that morning a young man sat on his sea bag, apart from the others, and watched. He’d never seen a salvager work. He’d never seen any of it except in textbook pictures and diagrams. He marveled at the ease with which everything came together. He decided, at the first opportunity, to speak to the captain, the infamous man known as Sonny Wade.