

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AS "TORPEDO"

JEFF EDWARDS

SEA OF SHADOWS

"A TIMELESS WARRIOR EPIC. JEFF EDWARDS SPINS A STUNNING AND IRRESISTIBLY-BELIEVABLE TALE OF SAVAGE MODERN NAVAL COMBAT."

— JOE BUFF, Bestselling author of 'SEAS OF CRISIS' and 'CRUSH DEPTH'

“A timeless warrior epic. Jeff Edwards spins a stunning and irresistibly-believable tale of savage modern naval combat.”

— **JOE BUFF**, Bestselling author of ‘SEAS OF CRISIS,’ and ‘CRUSH DEPTH’

“Unfamiliar and exciting territory—a magnificent yarn!”

— **GREG BEAR**, New York Times bestselling author of ‘MARIPOSA,’ and ‘DARWIN’S RADIO’

“... as close as you can get to naval surface combat without being shot at. Jeff Edwards has penned a fast, no-holds-barred thriller that never lets up. Highly recommended.”

— **JACK DuBRUL**, Bestselling author of ‘THE SILENT SEA,’ and ‘HAVOC’

“A nerve-wracking battle of ruse, counter-ruse, and explosive ambush ... Edwards keeps the pacing brisk and the action taut ... an engrossing tale of cutting-edge naval warfare.”

— **KIRKUS DISCOVERIES**

“Here is a writer at the top of his game. The result is a brilliant techno-thriller, the kind a young Clancy would be proud to call his own.”

— **HOMER HICKAM**, Bestselling author of ‘OCTOBER SKY,’ and ‘THE FAR REACHES’

“Edwards wields politics and naval combat tactics with a skill equal to the acknowledged masters of military fiction.”

— **THE MILITARY PRESS**

“The best naval action novel I have ever read.”

— **W. H. MCDONALD**, President of the Military Writers Society of America

“Smart and involving, with an action through-line that shoots ahead ... fast and lethal. I read it in one sitting.”

— **PAUL L. SANDBERG**, Producer of ‘THE BOURNE SUPREMACY,’ and ‘THE BOURNE ULTIMATUM’

SEA OF SHADOWS

Jeff Edwards



STEALTH BOOKS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their assistance in bringing this book to life:

Bill Keppler of the State Department Office of Protocol; Michael A. Petrillo, Arabic linguist and Middle Eastern cultural specialist; Cathy Monaghan of the British Embassy in Washington, DC; the staff of the Los Angeles office of the British Consulate-General; the Chinese Studies Program at the University of California, San Diego; TM1(SW) Gary D. Johnson; TM1(SW) Charles Copes; Peter H. Zindler, marine engineer; and several others, some of whom asked not to be named, and others whose names have slipped my leaky brain. The information I received from these fine people was superb. Any errors that have crept into this work are mine, not theirs.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Master Modeler Richard Melillo of The Modeler's Art (TheModelersArt.com) for building me an extraordinary model of the DMA-37 torpedo.

Last, but certainly not least, I'd like to thank my editor and close friend, Don Gerrard, for believing when I had forgotten to, and for making me go back and do the hard parts until they were right.

Missiles are fast. They're dangerous. They're sexy. So when we think about warfare at sea, it's natural that missiles are the first things we think about. But we can shoot down missiles. We can decoy them with chaff—jam them—hide from them with infrared suppression systems and minimized radar cross-sections.

Our Kingfisher sonars can detect mines, and we can destroy them or maneuver to avoid them.

Our ships are hardened against chemical and biological weapons.

But how do you stop a torpedo? Thirty years of R-and-D, and we still don't have a viable system for intercepting torpedoes. We can't shoot them down; we can't jam them; we can't hide from them. And, even third-world torpedoes can do upward of fifty knots, so we sure as hell can't outrun them.

We do have decoy systems that have shown some effectiveness, and a couple of tricky torpedo evasion maneuvers that work pretty well. But, they depend on split-second timing and perfect execution. Activate your decoys ten seconds too soon (or five seconds too late) and an enemy torpedo will eat your lunch. Hold an evasion turn a little too long, or not long enough, and it's game over.

We build the toughest warships on the planet, but the best engineers in the business agree that nearly every class of torpedo currently being deployed has the capacity to sink one of our ships with a single shot. To make matters worse, none of our potential adversaries believe in shooting torpedoes one-at-a-time. Typically, they shoot salvos of two or three.

It's inevitable. One day soon, maybe next year—hell, maybe next week, maybe an hour from now—one of our ships is going to end up on the wrong end of a spread of hostile torpedoes. And, when that happens, we're going to discover that *we* are the poor bastards who brought a knife to a gunfight.

—Excerpted from the Chief of Naval Operations' comments to the graduating class at Annapolis.

*Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean-roll!
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
Man marks the earth with ruin-his control
Stops with the shore;-upon the watery plain
The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain
A shadow of man's ravage, save his own,
When for a moment, like a drop of rain,
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,
Without a grave, unknell'd, uncoffin'd, and unknown.*

— Lord Byron, *The Dark, Blue Sea*

PROLOGUE

In the language of its builders, the weapon's name was *Ozeankriegsführungstechnologien Deutsches Exportmodell DMA37-R5092*—Ocean Warfare Technologies German Export Model DMA37 (Serial Number R5092). On the munitions inventory, its name was shortened to R-92. But the weapon did not know either of these names. It had no name for itself. It was not even aware of its own existence. It waited in its shipping canister, cradled as snugly in the cylindrical steel container as a high-powered bullet in the chamber of a rifle. Cold. Sightless. Unfeeling. Not sleeping, merely unawakened.

R-92 was a state-of-the-art acoustic homing torpedo. It was a cybernetic predator: an electro-mechanical killing machine. Fast. Smart. Unbelievably lethal. Every component, from the shark-like hydrodynamic form of its fuselage—to its multi-spectrum acoustic sensors—to the axial-flow turbine that formed its engine, was optimized for the undersea environment. Its brain was a fifth-generation digital computer, hardwired for destruction with a machine-driven relentlessness that no living predator could match. R-92 and its brethren had been honed for the chase and the kill by two and a half centuries of technological evolution.

But R-92 knew none of these things. It simply waited.

CHAPTER 1

**USS TOWERS (DDG-103)
NORTHERN ARABIAN GULF
SATURDAY, 05 MAY
1114 hours (11:14 AM)
TIME ZONE +3 'CHARLIE'**

Bowie timed it carefully, lifting each foot at just the right second as he ducked through the hatch combing of the open blast door and ran out onto the forecastle of his ship. Twenty-one laps around the deck today and his breaths were still coming evenly, but the air was hot and so humid that it felt like breathing soup. Sweat plastered his short black hair to his forehead, and his sleeveless U.S. Naval Academy T-shirt stuck to his skin, the faded goat mascot logo blending into the perspiration-darkened fabric. It wasn't even noon yet, and the sun was already fierce enough to blur the visual horizon with rapidly evaporating water. At least the seas were calm at the moment—not exactly a given in the Arabian Gulf this time of year.

His crew called him Captain Jim Bowie, which was a technical misnomer on two counts. In fact, his name was Samuel Harlan Bowie, and his actual rank was commander. The title of *Captain* was honorary; by ancient nautical tradition, the commanding officer of a naval warship is always referred to as “Captain,” no matter what actual rank he carries. The *Jim* part had been following him around since childhood, a nearly inevitable consequence of having grown up in San Antonio, Texas, with the last name of Bowie. He'd long since given up the battle and accepted his nickname. It beat the hell out of what his buddies had called him at the Academy, anyway.

Bowie curved to his left, cutting between the ankle-high platform of the forward missile launcher and the low wedge of the 5-inch gun mount.

From a visual perspective, the gun was the most arresting feature on the forecastle. Its strange geometric shape and steeply angled sides gave it little resemblance to any of the generations of naval artillery that had preceded it, but the long steel barrel that protruded from the forward slope of the wedge left no doubt as to its purpose.

Situated aft of the gun, the forward missile launcher was not nearly as visually impressive. To the untrained eye, the launcher looked like a grid of square hatches set flush into an ankle-high steel platform. The innocuous-looking hatches were armored with Kevlar-reinforced steel, and every hatch concealed a vertical missile silo, known as a “cell.” Loaded in those cells, and their twins in the aft launcher, were the missiles that comprised the ship’s real destructive force.

When he reached the far side of the launcher, Bowie curved left again, back toward the superstructure. Another of the tricky step-duck maneuvers carried him through the port side blast doors and into the port break. This short stretch of enclosed passageway shielded him from the sun, giving him a few seconds of shade and relatively cool air. Then he dashed out into the sun again, running down the port side main deck toward the stern.

At first glance, Bowie was more likely to be taken for an accountant than a naval officer. His long face and narrow cheekbones gave him a clean and efficient look that his neatly trimmed black hair seemed to echo. His lips were thin and slightly turned down at the corners, creating a permanently thoughtful expression that reinforced the image of humorless efficiency. The laugh lines around his mouth were the only giveaways of the imaginative and playful spirit that hid behind his somber brown eyes.

A shade under six feet tall, he had a compact physique that was neither skinny nor overtly muscular. At thirty-eight, he was in the best shape of his life. He was also at the pinnacle of his career, and he knew it. No matter where he went from here, it would be downhill.

Certainly there were more promotions in his future (barring death or major screw-ups), but this was his one shot at his lifelong dream: command of a warship. He was trying very hard not to count the days, but he knew he had less than four months left to enjoy it. Then Bowie would have to turn command of the *Towers* over to someone else and move on to the next phase of his career. He didn’t like to think about that, but he knew the Navy’s advancement pipeline all too well. After the *Towers*, he’d be transferred to a shore duty billet, probably a career-enhancing staff position at the headquarters of one of the major commands—part of the Navy’s plan to give him political seasoning that he didn’t want, in preparation for selection to full-bird captain.

His next chance to command at sea would probably be as commodore of a destroyer squadron, overseeing other people’s ships. Command of a squadron was an important job, but it was too much like being an astronaut’s boss, instead of an astronaut. If he was very, *very* lucky, he might be able to wrangle command of one of the Aegis guided missile

cruisers. But there weren't very many of the old *Ticonderoga* Class cruisers left to go around, and the Navy wouldn't be willing to waste a valuable full-bird captain on a destroyer or a frigate.

He reached the amidships break, where the forward deckhouse ended and a narrow section of open deck separated the forward superstructure from the aft superstructure. He edged closer to the lifelines as he ran, giving himself a cushion of space in case someone opened one of the watertight doors without warning. He'd made that mistake years ago, as a boot ensign on the USS *Bunker Hill*. A second class Signalman had opened a door right in front of him, and Bowie had slammed into the reinforced steel while running at full-tilt. A sprained wrist and two black eyes had given him a personal reminder of one of the most basic principles of physics: *Force = Mass × Acceleration*.

Bowie passed an exhaust vent and caught a half-second blast of what seemed to be cooler air. The temperature differential was a sensory illusion, caused by the movement of the air over his skin. In reality, the exhaust from every vent on board was precisely monitored and alternately heated or cooled to match the ambient temperature of the air surrounding the ship. The system was expensive, and a pain in the ass to maintain, but it made the ship functionally invisible to infrared sensors or heat-seeking missiles. And in this age of three-dimensional Battle Space Management, stealth was paramount.

His ship, USS *Towers*, had been built from the keel up with stealth in mind. She was 529 feet long, 66½ feet wide, and (if the media hype was to be believed) virtually invisible. The fourth (and last) ship in the heavily modified third "Flight" of *Arleigh Burke* Class destroyers, *Towers* was an example of cutting-edge military stealth technology. She was not, however, the "ghost ship" suggested by news magazines and Internet Web sites. In fact, from his vantage point running circles around her deck, it was difficult for Bowie to imagine how the destroyer even rated her official classification as a "Reduced Observability Vessel."

The low pyramid shapes of her minimized superstructure and the severely raked angle of her short mast gave her a decidedly strange profile, but she was far from invisible—up close anyway. From a distance of a few thousand yards, however, that began to change. Ninety-plus percent of her exposed surfaces were covered with polymerized carbon-fiber PCMS tiles. Although designed primarily to absorb enemy radar, this newest generation of the Passive Countermeasure System had another handy feature: the rubbery tiles were impregnated with a phototropic pigment that changed color in response to changes in lighting. In bright sunlight, the tiles were a dusty blue-gray that blended into the interface

between sea and sky remarkably well. As the light dimmed, the PCMS tiles would darken accordingly, reaching a shade approaching black when the ship was in total darkness.

Although the cumulative effect was a far cry from invisibility, it camouflaged the ship's outlines enough to make her hard to see at a distance, not only reducing the range at which she could be detected visually, but also making it difficult for any optically based sensor—from the human eyeball to high-resolution video cameras—to determine her size, course, or speed.

A state-of-the-art thermal suppression system performed similar magic for the ship's infrared signature, while the radar-absorbent PCMS and the carefully calculated geometries of her hull and superstructure gave the long steel warship a radar cross section only a little larger than the average fiberglass motorboat.

Every cleat, chock, and padeye was designed to fold down and lock into its own form-fitting recess in the deck when not in use. Although intended strictly as a means of shaving another fraction off the ship's radar cross section, the hide-away fittings made for a remarkably uncluttered deck—which in turn made it a pretty good place to run.

The high-tech razzle-dazzle extended to the ship's acoustic signature as well. Seventh-generation silencing, including an acoustically isolated engineering plant, active noise-control modules, and the venerable (but still effective) Prairie and Masker systems, made *Towers* a difficult target for passive sonar sensors. Popular rumor held that she, and her sister ships in the Flight Three *Arleigh Burke* Class, were quieter cruising through the water at twenty knots than most warships were tied to the pier. That was an exaggeration, but not by much.

When he came to the aft end of the superstructure, Bowie curved to his left, dodging a pair of Gunner's Mates engaged in lubricating Mount 503, the aft-starboard .50-caliber machine gun. The arc of his improvised running track took Bowie around the aft missile launcher and back to the starboard side of the ship. The aft missile launcher marked the halfway point for each lap.

Only four more laps to go. Bowie's daily routine called for twenty-five and a half laps, which he had worked out to be about three miles. Once upon a time he'd done five miles a day, but then he'd discovered that while on board ship he didn't eat the right kinds of foods to fuel that sort of regimen. The extra mileage had pushed his metabolism into the catabolic zone, burning up muscle tissue as well as fat.

Maybe when he returned to shore duty he'd need to crank back up to five miles a day to keep away the nearly inevitable swivel-chair spread.

But that was in the future, a future that he wasn't quite ready to think about. A future in which he would no longer command what he considered to be the finest warship in the Pacific Fleet.

Bowie increased his stride a little as he turned up the starboard side. The ship's motion through the water generated relative wind, and running toward the bow, he was headed back into it.

Off to his right, an oil tanker was passing down the starboard side. It was an enormous thing—a supertanker—nearly twice as long as *Towers*, with an unloaded displacement of about three hundred thousand tons, rising maybe fifty feet above the water and obscuring his vision to starboard. The paint on its orange hull and white superstructure was bright and well maintained. It rode low in the water now, a sure indication that its tanks were full. Based on its size, Bowie estimated that it was carrying somewhere around two million barrels of oil.

The supertanker was about fifteen hundred yards out and nearing its closest point of approach. Bowie already knew that the big ship would pass *Towers* with a comfortable safety margin, but he couldn't stop himself from rechecking its position and heading every time he came around the deck for another lap. He knew that the Officer of the Deck had the situation well in hand, but—when it came to collision avoidance—it never hurt to have another pair of eyes open.

In the distance astern of and beyond the tanker, a pair of oil platforms squatted on the horizon, their images wavering like mirages in the desert-heated air. The larger of the platforms belched enormous plumes of fire into the sky as its flare tower burned off the natural gas that accumulated as a natural consequence of the oil-pumping process. It was a routine procedure that the local oil rig crews referred to as “off-gassing.” The Middle Eastern oil fields were so productive that it was marginally cheaper to incinerate natural gas than to containerize and ship it.

The wind was hot in Bowie's face, and he was beginning to look forward to the brief stretch of cool air he would find in the starboard break. He checked an urge to put on a burst of speed. Running in the heat was all about pacing yourself. *Patience*, he thought. *Patience*.

He glanced at the supertanker again. Oil. In the end, *everything* came down to oil. The light-sweet crude that these fields held in such abundance was easily fractionalized into kerosene, diesel fuel, and gasoline—the very lifeblood of the industrialized world.

Bowie had done an experiment with a globe once. He had discovered that he could cover all of the Arabian Gulf and most of the OPEC nations under the tips of two fingers. The idea that such a disproportionately small area had the power to influence events all over the planet was frightening.

When you factored in the region's political instability, the whole situation got scary as hell.

Bowie reached the boat deck and ran past the RHIBs, the ship's two Rigid-Hulled Inflatable Boats.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded: a jarring electronic klaxon that pounded its discordant rhythm out of every topside speaker. Bowie's easy jog turned instantly to a sprint. He was already into the starboard break and opening the outer door to the airlock when the alarm was replaced by the amplified voice of the Officer of the Deck.

"General Quarters, General Quarters. All hands man your battle stations. Set Material Condition Zebra throughout the ship. Commanding officer, your presence is requested on the bridge."

Five seconds later, Bowie was climbing the first of the four steeply inclined ladders that would take him to the bridge. He passed a dozen Sailors, all headed in different directions, toward their battle stations. Those who got caught in his path were quick to leap out of the way. One did not delay the captain under the best of circumstances, and certainly not when he was headed toward the bridge for General Quarters.

Bowie's running shoes pounded up the aluminum steps two at a time. He hadn't approved any training drills for this morning, so the emergency (whatever it was) had to be real.

He nearly ducked into his at-sea cabin to grab a set of coveralls and a pair of boots, but the OOD's amplified voice came over the 1-MC speakers again. "Away the Small Craft Action Team. Now set Tac-Sit One. This is not a drill."

Bowie put on a burst of speed as he hit the last ladder. *Screw the coveralls. If the OOD was declaring Tactical Situation One, he was expecting immediate combat. Something was getting ugly fast, but what in the hell could it be?*



The bridge on board *Towers* was a break with a centuries-old tradition in shipbuilding. In place of a customary "walk-around" style pilothouse that ran from one side of the ship to the other, the *Towers*' design offered a small angular module that protruded from the leading edge of the superstructure like a faceted bump.

Seen from the inside, it resembled the cockpit of a jumbo jet. Two contoured chairs, each surrounded by instrument-packed control consoles, dominated the small amount of floor space. The forward-most of these chairs belonged to the Helmsman, a junior petty officer whose primary

duty was to steer the ship and issue speed commands to its engines. Behind the Helmsman sat the Officer of the Deck; his chair was mounted on a platform to give him an unrestricted view through the angled bridge windows. In another break with nautical tradition, there were no chairs for the commanding officer, or his second in command, the executive officer.

Bowie stepped through the last watertight door and edged into the cramped control room. The Helmsman's voice announced his presence before he had closed and dogged the door. "The captain's on the bridge!"

Bowie squeezed in next to the OOD's chair and grabbed the overhead handrail that was the only real provision for visitors. He began to shiver almost instantly as cool air from the circulation vents hit his sweat-drenched skin. "What have you got, Brett?"

Lieutenant Brett Parker looked up from his console. His boyishly good-looking features were taut, his normally mischievous green eyes dark and intense. He pointed out the window toward a pair of dark shapes skimming rapidly across the water: small boats, moving fast. The Bridge Heads-Up Display projected targeting symbols on the inside of the windows, superimposing red diamond-shaped brackets around each of the rapidly moving boats. "Sledgehammers, sir. Two of them, off the starboard bow—about a thousand yards out. Looks like they came in on the far side of that tanker and pretty much used it for cover until they got in close."

Sledgehammer was the current Navy code word for a motorboat armed with an over-the-shoulder missile launcher.

Bowie felt his stomach tighten a fraction. "Damn." He stared at the target symbols, and then at the small boats behind them. "Are you sure they're Sledgehammers?"

"Pretty much, sir. They've made two high-speed runs on us already, sheering off suddenly both times. It looked like they were practicing missile approaches. And my Helmsman thought he saw a laser flash on the last pass."

"I did, sir," the Helmsman said. "A red dot, dancing on the side of the gun mount. I think it was a targeting laser, sir."

Bowie nodded and looked around. "Did anybody else see it?"

The OOD shook his head. "I don't think so, sir."

"I saw the tanker when I was out there," Bowie said. "But I didn't see anything else."

The Helmsman piped up immediately. "With all due respect, Captain, I *know* what I saw."

The corners of Bowie's mouth curled up in the faintest hint of a smile. "Relax, son, I believe you. I was just wondering if anyone saw a laser from the second boat."

A speaker crackled in the overhead. "Captain? This is the TAO. Are you watching these guys on MMS?"

The voice belonged to the ship's Combat Systems Officer, Lieutenant Terri Sikes, currently standing duty as the Tactical Action Officer.

Bowie pressed the *talk* button on the comm box. "Not yet, Terri. Give us half a sec to get it punched up." He nodded toward his OOD.

Lieutenant Parker tapped out a rapid-fire sequence of keys on his wraparound control console. A burst of video static blossomed on one of the three display screens and then instantly resolved itself into a coherent image: a direct video feed from the mast-mounted sight, a high-definition video camera mounted near the top of the mast.

The video was black-and-white, but the picture was exceptionally crisp. The camera was locked on the nearer of the two speedboats. It was a cigarette boat: long and dagger-shaped, very fast and very low to the water. A continuous rooster tail of spray shot out from under the stern of the narrow fiberglass hull. The image jerked occasionally as the boat took a dip or a roll that the *Towers*' optical tracking computer hadn't anticipated.

Suddenly, the image froze and the Tactical Action Officer's voice came over the speaker. "There!" she said. "Right there, sir. Do you see *that*?"

Bowie pressed the *talk* button on the comm box. "What am I looking for?"

A pixelized oval appeared on the screen, drawn in by the TAO using a light pen. The area inside the oval magnified itself to show a grainy image of the interior of the cigarette boat. Two men were visible, or people, anyway—it was impossible to tell more from the frozen image. One of the figures was hunched over a console, obviously driving. The second figure was half-crouched, hanging on to the windscreen with one hand. His other hand was wrapped around a rectangular object draped over his right shoulder.

Bowie's stomach tightened another notch. "Got it."

The oval disappeared, and the image leapt back to life. "Sir," the TAO's voice said, "that's got to be a missile launcher. I think those bastards are going to light us up. Request permission to engage."

Bowie watched the screen. "Not yet," he said.

The boats were circling back around for another pass at the ship.

"Two boats," Bowie said to himself. "No markings. They're not terrorists, or they would have shot at us on the first pass. There's no way

to tell if they're Siraji or Iranian, but it's a decent bet that it's one of the two. I don't think anybody else around here is mad enough to shoot at us."

Lieutenant Parker cleared his throat. "Uh, Captain ... I have to agree with the TAO. Those boats are showing classic Sledgehammer attack profiles. We need to take them out before they get off a shot at us."

An enunciator on the Helmsman's console beeped once, lighting a green tattletale on his display panel. A second later, it beeped again, lighting another tattletale. "Material Condition Zebra is set throughout the ship," the Helmsman announced. "All gunnery stations are reporting manned and ready for Tac-Sit One."

Bowie kept his eyes on the black-and-white video. Something was funny here. If the cigarette boats really were Sledgehammers, why hadn't they attacked yet? "I'm not sure that's a missile launcher."

"What else could it be, sir?"

Bowie glanced up for a half-second into the eyes of his Officer of the Deck. "It could be a video camera, Brett."

The OOD's voice nearly squeaked. "But they trained a laser on us. They're targeting us, sir. It's obvious."

Bowie shook his head. "What's obvious is that they're trying to provoke us."

The TAO's voice came over the speaker. "Sledgehammers are inbound. I say again, Sledgehammers are *inbound*. Request permission to engage, sir!"

Bowie watched the video screen as the cigarette boats raced through the water toward his ship. The conditioned air of the bridge was turning his sweat-dampened skin to ice.

Sledgehammers were every skipper's nightmare. They were the poor man's navy: a boat, a shoulder-launched weapon, one idiot to drive, and another to shoot. Presto: instant navy. Not enough firepower to take out a warship, but more than enough to damage it. And even modest damage to a U.S. warship would be an incalculable propaganda coup for a third-rate nation.

Of course, if he blew the boats away and it turned out that they were not armed, then *that* would be a propaganda coup against the United States as well. The local nutcases weren't above sending out boats armed only with bulky old-fashioned video cameras and harmless laser pointers, hoping to spook a warship into attacking them.

Bowie's mouth felt suddenly dry. His intuition told him that the boats would have attacked by now if they were going to. He hoped like hell that his intuition wasn't about to get somebody killed. "Negative. Do not engage." Bowie could feel the crew on the bridge stiffen.

A flicker of red light shot through a side window and played around the interior of the bridge for a split-second before vanishing.

The Helmsman shouted, "Targeting laser!"

"Do *not* engage!" Bowie repeated. He waited about two heartbeats and then added, "I have the Conn. All engines ahead flank! Right full rudder!"

The ship heeled over instantly as the Helmsman executed his orders. "Sir, my rudder is right thirty degrees! No new course given. All engines ahead flank!"

The big destroyer surged forward as all four of her gas turbine engines wound up to top speed, pouring 105,000 horsepower into each of her twin propeller shafts. The acoustic suppression systems muted the rising scream of the turbines to a barely audible wail, like the sound of a jet taking off in the distance.

"Captain," the OOD said, "that's going to take us right into them!"

"You're damned right it is!" Bowie snapped. "If they want to play chicken, then we'll show them how we do it back home!"

The course change spun the bow of the ship around toward the charging cigarette boats. When they were centered in the front bridge window, Bowie said, "Steady as she goes."

"Helmsman aye! She goes two-seven-three, sir!"

Bowie nodded. "Very well. Brett, stand by to launch chaff."

"Sir, we're too close for chaff. It'll be on the other side of the boats before it blooms."

"I know that," Bowie said. "It's not worth a damn against laser-guided weapons anyway. I just want to scare the shit out of them." He pressed the *talk* button on the comm box. "Terri, I want every gun on this ship pointed at those boats! Now!"

"Yes, sir!"

Bowie watched the boats through the front bridge window. They were getting larger fast, the range closing rapidly as they barreled toward a head-on collision with his ship. There would be no collision; Bowie was sure of that. The boats would sheer off, or the reinforced steel bow of the destroyer would crush their fragile fiberglass hulls like eggshells. They would turn, all right. But would they launch missiles first? And if they did, what would they target? The bridge windows? That's what he would do in their position.

The TAO's voice came over the speaker. "All guns are trained on the Sledgehammers, sir."

Bowie glared at the onrushing boats. "All right, you bastards," he said quietly. "Let's see what you've got ..."

He waited another five seconds while the boats grew ever larger in the window. Then he said, "Launch chaff, port and starboard!"

Lieutenant Parker's response was nearly instantaneous; he slammed a button on his console. "Chaff away, sir!"

Blunt projectiles rocketed out of the forward RBOC launchers. Super Rapid-Blooming Overboard Chaff rounds hurtled through the air, passing over the charging cigarette boats and exploding on the far side of them, littering the sky with aluminum dust and metallic confetti.

Designed to fool enemy radar with false targets, the chaff had no electronic effect on the small boats, since they had no radar. But the effect Bowie wanted was psychological, not electronic.

He tried to imagine what his ship looked like to the men aboard the cigarette boats: 9,794 tons of steel rushing down on them like a freight train; chaff exploding overhead; and every gun on board pointed down their throats.

His grip tightened on the handrail above his head. "Come on, you bastards, *turn* ..."

There wasn't a sound on the ship except the muted wail of the turbine engines. Everyone on the bridge seemed to be holding their breath.

The boats grew larger in the window. They couldn't be more than fifty yards away now. This was not going to work. The boats weren't going to sheer away. They were waiting to get close enough to make their missiles count.

Bowie glanced up at his Officer of the Deck. The young lieutenant's eyes were locked on him.

Bowie pressed the *talk* button on the comm box. "Stand by your guns."

The boats weren't going to turn. The bastards were calling his bluff.

A chill washed down his spine that had nothing to do with the air conditioning or his damp running clothes. It had come on him suddenly, the moment that every military commander secretly dreads. The crux of a decision in which there was no good choice, where both action and inaction were equally likely to lead to disaster.

If he sank the boats and they turned out to be unarmed, the United States would find itself neck-deep in an international incident, and Bowie's career would be over. A lifetime of hard work and sacrifice, gone in a matter of seconds. It would play out in the U.S. media as monumental incompetence at best, and criminal disregard for human life at worst. In the current political climate, the Arab press wouldn't bother with half-measures; they'd cut straight to the chase and call it murder. And, under all the flack and the political posturing, four men would be dead. Four

men who might not be guilty of any crime more serious than harassing an American warship.

On the other hand, if he *didn't* shoot the boats and they *did* turn out to be armed, the safety of his ship and crew were at risk. This could end with some of *his* men going home in body bags. And, of considerably lesser importance, his career would *still* be at an end.

How ironic was that? Ten minutes earlier, he'd been feeling sorry for himself, decrying the lack of excitement in his future career prospects. Now, he was about to watch his career self-destruct, and it was the very least of his worries.

He watched the boats continue to close. His first duty was to protect his crew. He couldn't wait for the Sledgehammers to take the first shot. It wasn't really a very hard decision to make, but it hurt like hell to have to throw away everything he had ever worked for.

He opened his mouth to give the order to fire, but he was interrupted by a shout from the Helmsman. "They're turning, sir! They're running away!"

Bowie looked at the boats. Sure enough, they had peeled off and appeared to be running. He let out a breath that he didn't even realize he'd been holding.

The TAO keyed her mike for a few seconds to let him hear the cheers coming from the crew in Combat Information Center. In the background, a male voice cut loose with a rebel yell.

The boats grew smaller in the window. Bowie watched them until he was certain that they weren't coming back. Then he turned to his Officer of the Deck. "Stand us down from General Quarters."

The young lieutenant was still a little pale. "Yes, sir!"

Bowie looked down at the cold, sweat-drenched T-shirt sticking to his skin. "Take the Conn, Brett. I need a shower."

Sea of Shadows is available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)