

**The TRENCH**  
(the sequel to MEG; A Novel of Deep Terror)  
by *N.Y. Times Best-selling author*  
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**CHAPTER 1**

**DEEP PRESSURES**

*Mariana Trench*  
*12 degrees North Latitude*  
*144 degrees East Longitude*

**March 22, 2001**

Retired Navy deep-sea pilot Barry Leace wiped the sweat from his palms as he checked the depth indicator of the *Proteus*. Thirty-four thousand, seven hundred and eighteen feet. Nearly seven miles of water above their heads, sixteen thousand pounds per square inch of water pressure surrounding them.

*Just stop thinking about it . . .*

Leace glanced around the tight quarters of the four-man submersible. Racks of computer monitors, electronics, and a bewildering jungle of wires filled the pressurized hull. The watertight coffin barely had room for its crew.

Below the navigation console, Team Leader Ellis Richards and his assistant, Linda Heron stared out through tiny portholes in the floor of the *Proteus's* bow.

“See those animals with the furry green pelt?” Linda asked. “Those are Pompeii worms, capable of withstanding temperature variations from 22 degrees all the way to 81 degrees Celsius. The hydrothermal vents supply sulfur for bacteria to live off of, which in turn are digested by the tube worms--”

“Linda--”

“--which are a source of food to all sorts of bizarre-looking life forms.”

“Linda, enough with the goddamn biology lesson,” Ellis said.

“Sorry.” Embarrassed, the petite geologist turned back to the porthole, cupping her hands around her eyes to eliminate glare.

The sub's fourth crewman, Khali Habash, looked down from his control console at Linda, smiling to himself. The girl loved to talk, especially when she was nervous, a quality the Arab never hesitated to exploit.

Habash's real name was Arie Levy, a Jew born and raised in Syria. It had been nearly ten years since the day Arie had been recruited by MOSSAD, Israel's covert intelligence agency. Since that time he had led a double life, spending half his time in Israel with his wife and three children, traveling around the Arab world and Russia the rest of the time, posing as a plasma physicist. It had taken four hard years of sacrifice for the agent to infiltrate Benedict Singer's

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organization, but here he was, seven miles beneath the Pacific, about to learn secrets that could change humanity forever.

Arie checked the external temperature gauge. “Hey Linda, can you believe the water’s seventy-eight degrees?”

The girl perked up again. “Incredible, isn’t it. We call it hydrothermal megaplumes. The hot mineral water pumping out of these black smokers is 700 degrees. As it rises, it warms the freezing seawater column until it reaches neutral buoyancy at about twelve hundred feet above the floor of the trench. Ocean currents then spread the plume laterally. The floating layer of soot from the minerals creates a ceiling which acts like insulation, sealing a tropical layer of water along the bottom of the gorge.”

“The layer never cools?”

“Never. These hydrothermal vents are ‘chronic’ plumes. They’ve been active since the *Cretaceous* period.”

Ellis Richards checked his watch again. As the project’s team leader, he was perpetually worried about falling behind schedule. “Christ, three hours and it seems like we’ve barely made any headway. Linda, is it just me, or does it seem like this pilot has no idea what he’s doing?” Barry Leace ignored the insult. He checked his sonar and cursed under his breath. They had moved too far ahead of the *Benthos*, Geo-Tech Industries’ mobile deep-sea lab community and submarine docking station. The billion-dollar mother ship resembled a domed sports arena with a flat surface for an underbelly, dangling three mammoth shock absorbers for legs. Hovering just above the turbulent sea floor in neutral buoyancy, the 46,000 square foot titanium structure reminded Leace of a monstrous Man O’ War as it followed them north through the most hostile

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environment on the planet.

Barry Leace had served on three different submarines during his tenure in the Navy. He had long ago become accustomed to living in claustrophobic quarters beneath the waves. Not everyone could make it as a submariner. One had to be in tip-top mental and psychological shape, able to perform while knowing that drowning in darkness within a steel ship hundreds of fathoms below the surface was just an accident away.

Leace had that fortitude, that mental toughness, proving it time and again during his twenty-six years of service. That's why he was so surprised at how easily his psyche was unraveling within the Mariana trench. Confidence that had been nurtured through thousands of hours of submarine duty had suddenly dissipated the moment the *Proteus* cleared its abyssal docking bay aboard the *Benthos*.

Truth be known, it wasn't the depths that unnerved him. Four years earlier, through man's intervention, *Carcharodon Megalodon*, a prehistoric sixty-foot species of great white shark had risen from this very trench to wreak havoc. Although the albino nightmare had eventually been destroyed and its surviving offspring captured, at least a dozen people had died within its seven-foot jaws. Where there was one creature, there might be more. Despite all of Geo-Tech's precautions and technical innovations, the submersible pilot was still a bundle of nerves.

Leace pulled back on the throttle controls, slowing the main propulsion engine. He had no desire to get too far ahead of their abyssal escort.

"What is it now, Captain?" Richards asked. "Why are we slowing?"

"Temperature's rising again. We must be approaching another series of hydrothermal

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vents. The last thing I want is to collide with one of those black smokers.”

Richards squeezed his eyes shut in frustration. “God dammit--”

Leace pressed his face against the porthole, eluding Richard’s tirade.

The submersible’s lights illuminated a petrified forest of sulfur and mineral deposits, the towering stacks rising thirty feet or more from the bottom. Dark, billowing clouds of superheated, mineral-rich water gushed from the mouths of the bizarre chimneys.

Arie watched Ellis Richards move menacingly toward the pilot’s navigational console. “Captain, let’s get something straight. I’m in charge of this mission, not you. My orders are for us to cover no less than twenty miles a day, something we’ll never come close to at this snail’s pace.”

“Better safe than sorry, Mr. Richards. I don’t want to get too far ahead of the *Benthos*, at least not until I get a feel for this sub.”

“A *feel for* . . . I thought you were an experienced pilot?”

“I am,” Leace said. “That’s why I’m slowing down.”

Linda looked up from her porthole. “Exactly how far ahead of the *Benthos* are we, Captain?”

“Just over six kilometers.”

“Six kilometers, that’s all? Benedict Singer’s going to flip.” Richards looked like he was about to have an aneurysm. “Look, Captain, the *Prometheus* and *Epimetheus* are expected to arrive topside early next week. Neither submersible can even begin its work until we complete ours.”

“I know that.”

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“You should. GTI’s paying you a king’s ransom to pilot the *Proteus*. We can’t keep waiting for the *Benthos* to play catch up every time we go out. We’ll add another 30 days or more to our time table, which is completely unacceptable.”

“So is dying, Mr. Richards. My job is to keep us alive in this hell-hole, not take chances so you can earn your bonus for coming in ahead of schedule.”

Richards stared at him. “You’re scared, aren’t you, Captain?”

“Ellis--”

“No, Linda, I’m right.”

Arie watched the dynamics unfold. In the few weeks he had been in the abyss, the MOSSAD agent had observed Ellis Richards to be an obstinate man who preferred the use of bully-tactics rather than concede he might be wrong. Though mankind knew more about distant galaxies than about the Mariana trench, Richards proclaimed himself an expert on the abyss, somehow knowing everything from its hidden geology to its mysterious life forms.

To Arie Levy, Richards’ pompous attitude made him a dangerous man.

Captain Leace glared back at Richards. “I have a healthy dose of fear inside me, if that’s what you mean. It’s obvious that neither one of you fully appreciates the dangers of working in 35,000 feet of water. Try to understand, if something should go wrong, if we should accidentally hit something . . . or if something hits us, there are no watertight doors to seal and no standard operating procedures to follow. In the event of a hull breach, you won’t even have time to bend over and kiss your ass good-bye.”

“Sounds to me like you’ve lost your nerve,” Richards said.

“What did you say?”

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“What do you think, Habash? Has our Captain lost his nerve?”

“Considering that the surviving descendants of *Carcharodon Megalodon* are living somewhere within this gorge, I must respect the Captain’s opinion,” Arie said. “At the same time, we have more than 60,000 square miles of sea floor to search. Our surface ship’s towed sonar array was designed to alert us to any approaching life forms in plenty of time to retreat back to the safety of the *Benthos*.”

“Plenty of time?” Leace shook his head in amazement. “How the hell do we know the speed at which a life form might approach? Besides, the *Goliath*’s in the midst of gale force seas. Topside interference is disrupting communications.”

“In that case, I suggest we collect our first samples here and give the *Benthos* a chance to catch up. Once the weather calms, I’m sure you can find a way to make up for lost time.”

Leace shot Linda an exasperated look before returning to his control console. He double-checked the acoustic transponders, took another quick glance out his view port, then engaged the lateral thrusters. Maneuvering between several black smokers, the *Proteus* descended slowly, establishing neutral buoyancy just above a cluster of glowing tubeworms. The entanglement of mouthless, fourteen-foot life forms writhed in the current like the serpents on *Medusa*’s head.

“I’m initiating our gas chromatography detectors,” Arie said. “We could cut our mission time in half if we can detect helium isotopes leaking from these hydrothermal vents.”

“Fine, fine, just do it,” Richards said, struggling with the laptop controls that operated the sub’s robotic arms. Using the sub’s underwater camera to see, Richards began manipulating the two central control knobs, causing the twin robotic arms to extend from beneath the sub. Gingerly, he directed the pincers of the left arm, snagging the isotherm sampling basket from its

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storage area.

Captain Leace watched the robotic arms extend toward the sea bed, their movements stirring the bottom into clouds of mud. He closed his eyes and tried to relax, listening to the hydraulic whine of the pincers.

“Move to your left,” Linda said, directing Richards from her view port. “Just beyond that tubeworm cluster.”

Loud warning *blips* from the sonar caused the pilot’s heart to skip a beat. He grabbed the acoustical printout, then checked the sonar screen in disbelief.

A tight cluster of objects had materialized. Large objects.

Leace felt his throat tighten. The others continued working, not even bothering to look up.

“Habash, we’ve got company.”

Arie turned. “What is it?”

“Sonar reports three unidentified objects, bearing zero-one-five. Range seven-point-four kilometers. Speed, fifteen knots and closing. Heading directly for us.”

“Any word from the surface?”

“I’m trying now. No response. We’re on our own.”

“What do you suggest?” Arie suddenly felt a bit claustrophobic himself.

Leace stared at the sonar console. “I say we get the hell out of here. Richards, retract the robotic arms, we’re returning immediately to the *Benthos*.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Captain, are you certain?” Linda registered a knot of fear in her stomach.

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“Look for yourself. Whatever these creatures are, they’re accelerating through the trench in our direction. Richards, I said retract those mechanical arms.”

“And I’m saying, fuck you. It’s taken me twenty minutes to collect these samples and I’ll be damned if we’re going anywhere before I secure the bucket back onboard.”

Arie moved to the sonar console, staring at the three images. He thought back to his training sessions. *Were Megalodons pack hunters?*

“Maybe it’s just a school of fish,” Linda suggested. “Try to stay calm--”

“A school of fish? Stick to geology, Linda. Sonar indicates that these things are more than forty feet long. Out of my way--”

Leace ignited the lateral thrusters. *Steady. Not too fast. Don’t hit anything or you’ll rupture the hull.* The sub spun counterclockwise. A bone-rattling jolt shook the *Proteus*.

“Goddamn it, Leace,” Richards yelled. “You nearly tore the mechanical arm off. I just lost every sample.”

“I told you to retract the arms.” Leace accelerated the *Proteus* to its top speed of 1.8 knots. He knew the *Benthos* was moving toward them somewhere out there in the darkness.

The *blips* grew stronger.

*ETA thirty-two minutes.* Arie thought. *We’re too far out . . .*

“Captain, listen to me,” Linda said, grabbing his arm. “They’re not sharks.”

Leace stared ahead. “So, you’re a biologist now?”

“I think Linda is right,” Arie said, trying to reason with his own fear.

“Listen, Habash, whatever these things are, they’re a helluva lot bigger and a helluva lot faster than the *Proteus*.”

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The *blips* grew faster, Arie's heart racing to keep pace.

"This is absurd," Richards said.

Leace ignored him and leaned forward, staring through the porthole into the abyss. The smoke rising from the hydrothermal vents made it difficult to see beyond the perimeter. He shielded his eyes and strained to focus.

Long minutes passed in silence.

A darting movement ahead. Another to starboard. Very swift. Very large.

"They're here," the Captain whispered, a lump in his throat. *Fast fuckers.* . .

For a long moment, no one said a word, the only sounds coming from the *Proteus'* propeller.

With a sudden jolt, the sub pitched to starboard. Leace crashed face first into his console.

"What's happening?" Richards asked. "What did you hit?"

"I didn't hit anything. They hit us." Leace struggled with the navigational controls.

"She's not responding--something's wrong."

"*Shhh.* Listen," Linda whispered.

From above their heads they heard a faint sound--metal groaning.

"Oh, Christ, one of them is on top."

Arie listened at sonar, studying the screen.

"Leace, do something," Richards ordered.

"Hold on." The pilot swung the submersible hard to port, then back to starboard, trying to shake the creature off.

"Captain, stop," screamed Linda. "That plate's loosening!"

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The sound of grinding metal screeched along the top of the hull. Leace reached up and touched one of the titanium rivets welded into the plate above his head. He felt moisture and tasted his fingers. “Sea water,” he moaned. He leaned forward, praying for the *Benthos* to appear in his view port.

The sound of shearing metal grated in their ears as the *Proteus* dipped sideways.

“Son of a bitch.” Leace wiped the sweat from his face. “They’re tearing the fucking tail fin loose.”

Linda pushed her face against her view port. “Where’s the *Benthos*?”

Something huge broadsided the sub, hurtling stacks of recording equipment against the far wall.

“Captain, I think I know what they’re doing,” Arie shouted. “The two smaller ones are driving us to their larger companion.”

“These things are intelligent?”

“Look!” Linda yelled, pointing out the porthole.

Leace could just make out an ominous shape moving toward them. “It’s the *Benthos*--”

“You don’t have time to dock,” Arie warned. “Signal the *Benthos* to open the hangar doors!”

“It takes five minutes to flood the chamber,” Linda shouted.

Leace grabbed the radio. “Mayday . . . Mayday . . . *Benthos*, this is *Proteus*, request you open hangar doors immediately--”

“Proceed to docking area, *Proteus*--”

“Goddamn it, open the fucking hangar doors, now--”

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Standing beneath the loosening rivets, arms above his head, Arie Levy felt the titanium plate reverberate against his sweating palms. “Whatever these things are, they’re tearing this entire section loose--”

A whistling sound infiltrated the cabin.

“What’s that?” Richards whispered.

Leace looked up. “We’re losing integrity of the plates.”

“Captain,” Arie yelled, “the third creature--”

A tremendous force struck the sub’s bow, flinging Linda and Richards to the floor. Leace plunged over his navigation console, his head striking the view port glass. Blood flowed from his brow. He wiped it clear--staring in horror.

A luminous, crimson eye peered in through the glass.

Arie pushed his palm futilely against the titanium plate reverberating above his head. He thought about the information he had fought so long to acquire but had not been able to report. He thought about his wife and children whom he had forsaken in the line of duty.

The whistling sound above his head ceased. A pair of twisted rivets spit into the cabin like 5--caliber machine gun slugs.

The MOSSAD agent’s head imploded before the rivets hit the floor.

## ***CHAPTER 2***

### ***WAKING NIGHTMARE***

*Flickering sunlight penetrated the gray-green depths. Jonas Taylor plunged nosecone first into the void, struggling to draw breaths, his chest constricted, his throat burning. He*

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*opened his eyes wide, pressing his hands against the LEXAN pod.*

*The ocean turned black. He continued descending, spiraling downward into the gorge, all the while searching the darkness below.*

*A swirling vortex of soot appeared in the sub's headlights. An object rose out of the muddied current, another LEXAN pod. His light revealed a woman's body lying inside. Her face was obscured in shadows, but Jonas could make out her long black hair flowing like silk. For a brief moment he caught a glimpse of her dark, almond eyes--vacant eyes staring through him.*

*Terry . . .*

*He accelerated toward her, the sub barely moving, struggling against a strong current. He screamed her name again, a feeling of dread washing over him.*

*From the swirling current of debris behind her, a luminescent glow appeared. The unearthly light turned Terry's features to gray silhouette.*

*Jonas stopped breathing as Angel's monstrous head appeared. The demonic grin cracked open, a cavernous mouth revealing a stretch of pink gums and rows of serrated, triangular teeth.*

*Jonas tried to scream, but had no mouth.*

*Her eyes flashed open in recognition--and fear.*

*"Jonas," she whispered--as the beast took the entire pod into its mouth.*

*"Jonas."*

*"No!" Jonas shot upright in bed, his chest heaving, hands shaking uncontrollably.*

*"Honey, it's okay, it's okay." Terry sat up, stroking his hair, her own heart racing following her husband's sudden screams.*

*Morning sunlight streamed through the wooden shutters, illuminating the familiar bedroom as Jonas came out of the night terror. He turned and kissed Terry's hand.*

*"Are you okay?" she asked.*

*He nodded, struggling to find his voice.*

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“Was it the same dream? The one where you’re back in the trench?”

“Yes.” Jonas lay back in bed, allowing his wife to use his chest as a pillow. He stroked her long, silky black hair, then let his hand drift down the small of her back to her smooth, bare behind.

“It isn’t getting better,” she said. “You should see Dr. Wishnov before you give me a heart attack.”

“Post traumatic stress disorder--I already know what he’ll tell me. He’ll tell me to quit the Institute.”

“Maybe you should. Four years studying that monster is enough to give anyone nightmares, especially after all you’ve been through.”

The ring of the phone made them both jump. They smiled at each other. “Guess we’re both a little on edge,” Jonas said.

She rolled over and snuggled naked against him. “Don’t answer it.”

Jonas pulled her close, nuzzling her neck as he ran his hands across her breasts.

The phone continued ringing.

“God dammit.” Jonas grabbed the receiver. “Yes?”

“Doc, it’s Manny. Sorry to bother you, but I think you ought to get back to the lagoon.”

The tone of his assistant’s voice caused Jonas to sit up. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s Angel. Something’s wrong with her. You’d better get down here.”

Jonas felt his heart pounding in his throat. “Give me twenty minutes.” He hung up, then slipped out of bed to get dressed.

“Jonas, what is it?”

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He turned to his wife. “Manny says something’s wrong with the female. I have to go--”

“Hon, take it easy. Maybe you should eat something, you look as pale as a ghost.” To her surprise, he stopped getting dressed and sat down on the edge of the bed to hug her.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too. Jonas, tell me what’s wrong? I can feel your arms trembling.”

“I don’t know. I think I just had a deja-vu, like my absolute worst nightmare is about to become real.”

\* \* \*

It had been eleven years since Jonas Taylor had first encountered *Carcharodon Megalodon*, the fiercest predator ever to have lived. He had been nearly seven miles down in the Mariana trench, the deepest and most unexplored location on the planet, piloting the Navy’s three-man submersible, the *Seacliff*. On the last of the top-secret dives, the exhausted argonaut had been staring into the pitch black waters below when the unearthly white glow had appeared. Mesmerized by what he first took to be an aberration, his thoughts quickly turned to fear as the sixty-foot great white shark’s luminescent torpedo-shaped head began rising at them from the depths, the demonic smile opening to reveal seven-inch teeth.

A primordial panic had seized him, changing his life forever. Disregarding protocol, he had jettisoned the vessel’s ballast and raced the sub back to the surface, the rapid rise causing a malfunction in the pressurization system. Both scientists aboard the sub had died, and Jonas’s career as an argonaut was over. Or so he had thought.

Over the next seven years, Jonas became obsessed with proving to the world that the creature really existed. Returning to school, he earned advanced degrees in paleo-biology while

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his first wife supported them. Research over the mysterious disappearance of the Megalodon species soon led to a controversial theory and several publications. Jonas surmised that many of the prehistoric great white sharks had migrated to the warmer abyssal waters of the Mariana trench in order to avoid the cold surface temperatures brought about by the last ice age. Despite the scientific basis for his conclusions, his research was dismissed by colleagues as utter fantasy, his papers banned from many institutions.

Four years later, the opportunity to return to the Mariana trench was offered by Masao Tanaka, an old friend and mentor. The founder of the Tanaka Oceanographic Institute had not been interested in Megalodons or Jonas's theories about the creature's possible existence. Masao was building an artificial lagoon off the Monterey coast, a man-made habitat in which to study whales. To finance the project, he had entered into a joint venture agreement with the Japanese government to deploy an array of seismic detection robots, called UNIS, along the floor of the Mariana trench. Something had gone wrong with several of the devices, and Masao needed Jonas's assistance in order to retrieve one of the instruments. At first, the former deep-sea pilot had refused, unable to face his fear. But with his first marriage falling apart and his career in disarray, the thought of redemption became too seductive to pass up.

And then there was Terry.

Masao Tanaka's only daughter was as beautiful as she was rebellious. If Jonas would not accompany her brother on the mission, she would go in his place. And so Jonas had returned to the gorge, this time descending in a one-man submersible. Once more, fate would deem that he cross paths with one of Nature's most prolific killing machines. Tanaka's son died within one of the creature's jaws while another, a huge, pregnant female, managed to rise from its purgatory in

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the depths. In the end, Jonas had been forced to kill the very creature he had wanted to save, his heroics becoming the stuff of legend. Once the target of ridicule and scorn among his peers, the paleontologist suddenly had his career vindicated, and literally overnight became an international celebrity. *The man who cut the Meg's heart out.* Talk shows, television specials, reporters--it seemed everyone wanted a piece of him--as well as a peek at the female Megalodon pup that had been captured within the Tanaka lagoon.

He and Terry had wed. Masao Tanaka made his new son-in-law a partner at the Institute, and a year later, the most popular live exhibit in the world had opened for business in Monterey. But fame is fleeting, and celebrity, with all its perks, also makes one an easy target. Eight months after the lagoon had opened, Jonas and the Tanaka Institute found themselves defendants in a \$200 million dollar class-action lawsuit, filed by grieving relatives of those who had perished within the jaws of the Megalodon. Terry was four months pregnant when the trial began, a media frenzy rivaling that of the O.J. Simpson hearings.

*"Would you explain to the court, Professor Taylor, why you risked so much to capture a creature we've heard described as the most dangerous predator of all time?"*

*"We had the means to contain the Megalodon and study it."*

*"Tell us, Professor, when you had actually succeeded in sedating and capturing the monster in your cargo net, did you ever consider killing it?"*

*"No. We had it under control. There was no reason--"*

*"No reason? Isn't it more accurate to say that you and the Tanaka Institute simply made a business decision not to kill it? Money, Professor, it was all about money, wasn't it? You decided not to slay the goose when you had ample opportunity to do so only because you wanted its golden eggs. In the end, your greed cost innocent people their lives. And now, the offspring of the creature that violently slaughtered my clients' loved ones is reaping millions of dollars in profits for the Tanaka Institute. Is that your idea of justice, Professor?"*

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In the end, the jury had awarded damages exceeding everyone's expectations. When the courts refused their appeals, the Tanaka Institute had been forced into bankruptcy. Then, out of the blue, JAMSTEC, the Japanese Marine Science Technology Center that had first lured Masao Tanaka into the Mariana trench, offered the Institute a way out of their financial fix. Concerned about the rise in seismic activity along the Philippine and Pacific tectonic plates, the Japanese once again gave the Tanaka Institute an opportunity to deploy an entire array of UNIS robots along the Mariana trench floor. The contract was lucrative, but the dangers of returning to the abyss forced Masao Tanaka to seek the help of billionaire energy mogul, Benedict Singer, who was in the midst of constructing his own fleet of deep sea submersibles to explore the world's trenches. A partnership was formed and Masao was forced to give up controlling interest of his beloved Institute in order to fulfill the JAMSTEC contract and keep the doors of his attraction open.

\* \* \*

Jonas drove past the giant billboard advertisement of the Meg. "SEE ANGEL-- NATURE'S MOST PROLIFIC KILLING MACHINE. THREE SHOWS DAILY." He turned down the employee access road, waved to the guard, then pulled into his parking spot.

The haunting sound of baritone drums began pounding from the loudspeakers of the outdoor arena. He checked his watch and saw that the ten o'clock show was moments away from starting.

Viewed from above, the man-made Tanaka lagoon appeared as an oval lake surrounded by a concrete arena, which ran along the shoreline of the Pacific ocean. Connecting this

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enormous aquarium to the sea was an eighty-foot deep, thousand-foot-long channel at the midpoint of the lagoon's western wall. Consisting of two concrete sea walls running parallel to each other, the canal was cut off from the ocean by a set of mammoth double doors of reinforced steel which prevented the lagoon's star attraction from escaping.

As Jonas entered the 10,000 seat stadium, a *hush* fell over the impatient capacity crowd. All eyes, all camera lenses, turned to focus on the south-side of the aquarium where a five-hundred pound headless carcass of beef was now being attached to a thick chain dangling from an enormous "A" frame. Somewhere deep within the three-quarter-mile lagoon, still remaining out of sight, lurked "Angel," the monster they had paid theater ticket money to catch a glimpse of. The moment they had waited for would soon be upon them. Breakfast was being served.

Jonas followed the arena's circular walkway until he came to the concrete platform supporting the steel winch. He glanced up to see his assistant, Manny Vazquez, swing the raw carcass carefully into position above the tranquil blue water.

Below the concrete platform was a steel door, marked "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY." Jonas noticed that the steel safeguard protecting the locking mechanism had been partially pried back. *Damn kids . . .* He made a mental note to have it repaired, then unlocked the door and entered the dank stairwell, slamming the door closed behind him.

Jonas inhaled the familiar cool dampness, taking a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim light. He descended the two flights of stairs slowly, the voodoo-like drumbeats growing fainter as he moved deeper into the bowels of the facility.

The stairwell emptied into a subterranean semicircular corridor that ran along the southern circumference of the enormous tank. Eerie reflections of blue-green light illuminated an

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otherwise dark passage. Jonas moved slowly to the source of the light, turning to face the fifteen-foot high, six-inch thick LEXAN bay aquarium windows.

He was now thirty-feet below the surface, staring into the crystal-blue waters of the man-made lagoon. Jonas looked up, reading a newly erected sign above his head.

**DANGER. NO MOVEMENT WHILE MEGALODON IS PRESENT.**

He pressed his palm against the LEXAN glass. Its cold surface reverberated from the underwater acoustics being pumped into the tank, calling the beast to its meal. Drops of crimson blood from the dangling carcass dispersed along the surface of water above his head.

Jonas gripped the rail.

\* \* \*

Deep within the farthest confines of the ocean access canal, a pure white, triangular head the size of a small house continued its side-to-side mantra of movement, rubbing its conical snout raw against the porous gateway of steel. As the inflowing current of water from the Pacific passed through the pores of the gateway, the to-and-fro movements of the creature's head siphoned the scents of the sea into its nasal capsule. Miles away, pods of whales were migrating north along the California coastline. The seventy-two-foot prehistoric female great white could smell their sweet, pungent scents.

The deep bass of the underwater acoustics intensified, stimulating the highly sensitive cells running along the creature's lateral line. The reverberations meant food. The female turned away from the gate, remaining deep to avoid the electrical field being discharged from an array of pipes extending out along the upper inner portion of the sea wall, all that prevented the 62,000 pound behemoth from simply leaping sideways out of the canal.

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A great roar rose from the crowd as a prodigious wake accelerated into the lagoon. Ten thousand hearts fluttered as the seven-foot ivory dorsal fin appeared, cutting across the azure surface. The moving girth of the submerged leviathan sent fourteen-foot waves crashing over the eastern seawall of the tank.

The fin disappeared as the fish descended to circle below.

The audience breathed a collective sigh.



*“Ladies*

*and gentlemen, say hello to Angel, our own white Angel of Death!”*

With a *whoosh*, the beast suddenly exploded from the tank. Murderous jaws stretched a full ten feet, rows of six-to-nine-inch teeth hyperextending away from its mouth in slow motion, sending screams rippling through the crowd. For a heart-stopping moment, its upper torso

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remained suspended out of the water, defying gravity, as the monster shark latched onto the entire carcass in one horrific bite.

The “A” frame groaned, bending as the creature twisted from side to side in exaggerated throes of its humongous head, attempting to free its meal from the steel clamp. Mountains of frothy pink waves slammed against the plexiglass shielding the spectators. And then the carcass tore free, the steel support snapping back into place as the ghostly prehistoric predator claimed its prize.

The crowd swooned as the pale monstrosity slipped back into its tank and submerged. The cleanly picked clamp continued to dance at the end of the swinging chain, the steel girders of the “A” frame reverberating like a giant tuning fork from the force of the attack.

Through the myriad of bubbles and swirling shards of beef, Jonas stared at the creature’s ghastly alabaster belly as it chewed its food, the violent muscular contraction from its jaws sending great ripples gyrating down its underside and gills.

Waves created by the feeding behemoth pounded the glass, causing the sheet of LEXAN to rattle in its frame. Jonas stared in awe at the female’s girth, which had surpassed even that of its deceased parent. Angel’s lifelong existence in highly oxygenated surface waters had obviously had an impact on her size, as well as her ravenous appetite. Like her parent, her entire hide was luminescent white, a genetic adaptation the shark’s ancestors had acquired to lure prey in the perpetually dark waters of the Mariana trench.

Jonas remained motionless, staring at his waking nightmare. The soulless gray eye rolled back into place as it ravaged its last bite.

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A red phone on the wall rang. Jonas reached for it.

Detecting movement, the Megalodon arched its back. Sculling forward, it pushed its snout against the LEXAN glass as if looking in.

Jonas froze. He had never seen the female so agitated.

“Hello? Doc, are you there?”

Sweat trickled down Jonas’s armpit as Angel continued pressing against the underwater bay windows, staring at him. The LEXAN began bending.

Jonas recalled the words of the facility’s engineer. *Bending is normal. Flexible plates actually become stronger as they bend. If the window does shatter, the doors in the outer corridor will automatically seal.*

Angel pressed the side of her massive head against the window. The cataract-gray eye focused on him.

Jonas felt an exquisite eeriness. Only six inches of LEXAN separated him from death. What if the engineer had been wrong? After all, the tank was originally designed to harbor whales. The Meg turned and disappeared into the lagoon, heading straight for the canal.

Jonas released his breath, his limbs shaking. He leaned back against the wall, out of sight, trying to fathom what had just taken place.

“Doc, are you there?”

“Yeah, Manny. Christ, I see what you mean about our girl being a bit wound up.”

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“Better join us in the control room, boss. You’re gonna want to see this.”

Jonas exited the underwater viewing area, heading across the open-air arena to the administrative wing. Not bothering to wait for the elevator, he dashed up the three flights of stairs two steps at a time, pushing through the

double doors of the lagoon’s master control room.

Manny Vazquez was standing over two technicians seated by a computerized control board. From here, operators could oversee the lagoon’s environment, electronics, security, and sound system. Six closed-circuit television monitors were mounted above the board.

Manny pointed to an underwater image appearing on one of the monitors. Jonas could see the outline of the giant steel double doors that secured the canal from the Pacific.

“What am I looking at?”

“Keep watching.”

Jonas stared at the monitor. A minute passed, and then a white blur shot past the camera, accelerating toward the gateway faster than a tractor trailer, moving at more than one hundred feet per second. The head of the leviathan slammed into the sealed double doors, causing the televised image to shake violently.

“Oh, Jesus--she’s attacking the gate.”

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Manny nodded. “No doubt about it, Doc. That fish of yours wants out.”

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