

PROLOGUE

On July 3, 1989, an article appeared on page nine of the Soviet military newspaper Red Star reporting that the Soviet Navy had deployed a Poseidon-class submersible to the Barents Sea as part of a marine environmental research project. Two days later Pravda reported the tragic loss of seventy-three sailors in an airplane crash in a remote region of the Ural Mountains. The sailors, according to the article, were being transferred from the Northern Fleet at Severomorsk to the Pacific Ocean Fleet at Vladivostok. When questioned by a reporter from Reuters, V.I. Volkov, Chief of the Soviet Navy Political Directorate, denied that any relationship existed between these two incidents. He was lying.

THE DAWN MIST drifted in ghost-like columns across the still surface of the lake. In the shallows near the shore a heron stood motionless beside a fallen tree; farther out the dark head of a beaver glided past trailing a strand of water lilies. For Admiral Dmitri Nikolaevich Rastakov, these moments of beauty and unhurried solitude were rare and cherished—especially now with his nation in crisis and Gorbachëv leading them all to perdition.

He made another cast and watched the lure arc and drop with a soft splash. With a flick of the wrist he set the spinner and began reeling it in. Perhaps it was time to retire, he thought. Get out before the pressures of the job killed him. He could just make out the bright flash of the spinner as it ran in toward the boat. He had two perch caught already and would use them for his famous

ukbá, the fish soup his grandmother had taught him how to make. Pulling his line from the water, he reached into the tackle box for another lure and was startled by the sudden trilling of the mobile telephone. A large, cumbersome device encased in military steel and powered by nickel-cadmium batteries, it connected him to the Ministry of Defense and went with him everywhere, like a personal demon.

For a brief moment he was tempted to pitch the accursed thing overboard. Instead he lifted the black receiver.

“Yes?”

“Comrade Admiral, I have been trying to reach you for many hours.”

“The reception is seldom good here, Comrade Captain. What do you want?”

“We have a situation, very serious. I am on my way to you now and will arrive shortly.”

Rastakov returned the receiver to its cradle. The caller was Vasili Pushkin, a descendent of the noted Russian poet and his chief of staff. Mobile phones were not secure so Pushkin could say nothing more. The serious situation must have something to do with the sea trials for the *Tigron*, the new BARS-class attack submarine taking place in the Barents Sea four hundred miles to the north. Why else had Pushkin dared disturb him during his jealously guarded once-a-year fishing trip? A foreboding like dark winter clouds gathered in his mind as he retrieved his fish and laid them in the bottom of the boat. He cursed as he yanked the oil-stained rope and the outboard motor surged to life. He pushed the throttle arm and the boat swept around, the bow lifting, as it headed toward the shore, the waves fanning out in velvet undulations behind him

So, he thought to himself, it *was* too good to be true. Despite the long years of suffering and sacrifice, Russia was quickly falling into irrelevance. A second-class world power. Everything broken. But *if* the new technology had succeeded, what then? The Russian Bear would play its tune and the rest of the world would dance—the United States, Western Europe, China.

The rising sun was beginning to illuminate the upper branches of the white birches along the western shore of the lake as he cut the motor and allowed the wake to push him up to the dock. In the silence, he heard the KA-29 Helix helicopter approaching from the northeast, the urgent thumping of its six long blades cutting through the morning air, growing steadily louder and more commanding. An eagle resting on a tree limb near the bank took wing in protest, swooping low over the water.

Rastakov tied up to the dock and, forgetting the perch, hurried up the long narrow steps to the *dacha*. He called to his wife. He only had a few minutes to tell her he was leaving and to gather his things. Their vacation was over; she would have to close up on her own.

ON THE FLIGHT back to the Northern Fleet Naval Command Center, Pushkin briefed him. What he said confirmed Rastakov's worst fears.

"The *Tigron* performed flawlessly for the first twelve hours of her underwater high-speed trial," Pushkin shouted over the high-pitched whine of the helicopter's two turboshaft engines. "Then we received a broken up transmission; the signal was unintelligible. After that, only silence."

"What steps have you taken to locate her?" Rastakov asked.

"The destroyer *Druzbnii* and sub-tender *Pechora* were on station monitoring the tests. They have located the emergency buoy. The *Tigron* is on the sea bed at a depth of four hundred feet."

"Any surface debris?"

"None, Comrade Admiral."

So it was possible the *Tigron's* hull remained intact. Perhaps it was only a power failure, serious but not necessarily fatal. Rastakov forced himself to concentrate. Why had the sailors made no attempt to escape? The submarine's conning tower was equipped with a VKS pod. It was designed to accommodate most of the crew, and once detached, would float to the surface and serve as a lifeboat until rescuers arrived. But there was no VKS.

He looked out the side window. The sun was nearing its zenith and a whitish haze obscured much of the earth below. He rubbed his face and reminded himself to shave when they landed. He leaned back against the headrest, closed his eyes, and tried to imagine what the sailors inside the *Tigron* were going through. He had served sixteen years aboard submarines and knew the constant unspoken dread that lurked in the back of each submariner's mind—the dread of being trapped inside a stricken vessel deep beneath the surface of the ocean. It took a special kind of courage to overcome this fear and he often wondered what led young men to volunteer for such hazardous service. For some, no doubt, it was the desire to protect their beloved Mother Russia from her enemies; for others, little more than a restless young man's need to escape the crushing boredom and alcoholism of some village out on the steppe, doomed to discover in time that he has merely traded one kind of claustrophobia for another.

"Comrade Admiral?" Captain Pushkin was awaiting orders. To save the men inside the *Tigron*, Rastakov knew he must refuse to think of them. Instead he must focus on basics: currents and weather conditions, battery life and fuel requirements.

He felt confined and unbuckled his safety harness. "Do we have a rescue submersible ready for service?"

"Yes, at the base in Severodvinsk. It is being loaded onto a freighter now."

"When will it be ready to sail?"

"Within two hours."

Seventy-three men and the most important ship in the Soviet Navy lost at sea. A catastrophe.

"Do you have the weather forecast?"

Pushkin handed him a printout that called for clear skies through the next day, then clouds and scattered showers for the remainder of the week.

"Do the Americans suspect a problem?"

Pushkin gave a shrug. "We have detected no increase in their signal activity."

"Good, we must proceed with great caution."

A cover story was needed to explain away the use of the mini-sub; nothing went unnoticed by the American satellites. An article in *Red Star* about a marine research project should suffice. He would ask Pushkin to write it. He came from a literary family. They might yet fool the Americans.

TWENTY-TWO HOURS later, radio communication from the search and rescue team in the mini-sub was patched through to the Command Center. Because everything about the *Tigron* and its prototype technology was ultra-top secret, the signal was not broadcast over the public address system. Instead it was routed to only two sets of headphones, those of Admiral Rastakov and his chief of staff.

The submarine was lying on the sea floor, and the captain of the mini-sub reported no visible damage to the hull. He moved the sub into position over the forward emergency escape hatch.

“We are docking now.”

There was a long pause broken by intermittent static.

“Docking is complete,” the voice returned. “We are opening the escape hatch into the fourth compartment.”

More static. Rastakov glanced over at Pushkin. The man’s face was impenetrable as stone, but the dark circles under his eyes testified to his lack of sleep.

“The hatch is open,” the captain’s voice was efficient, brisk. “Lieutenants Voronin and Biryukov are entering the vessel.”

For the next hour, disembodied voices of the rescue team came from the dark void of the sea into the Admiral’s headphones. They spoke of grotesque scenes of death and destruction. Several times the men vomited, fouling their breathing masks. Twice they requested permission to turn back but were ordered to continue, documenting what they found with underwater cameras. They paid a high price for completing the work—within a month Lieutenant Voronin would resign his commission, while Lieutenant Biryukov would spend the next two years in and out of a psychiatric hospital. They would be the only ones ever to go inside the ill-fated *Tigron*.

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SHORTLY AFTERWARDS, Naval High Command sent Rastakov orders to attach magnetic charges to the hull of the submarine and blow her up. There was to be no formal investigation. No final report. No evidence whatsoever that a submarine called the *Tigron* had ever existed—except for the bones of seventy-three sailors scattered across the sea floor awaiting the end of time.

Then came the decision by the Kremlin to terminate the Svarog Project, the name given to the prototype technology being tested aboard the *Tigron*. Rastakov couldn't understand. What had happened was most unfortunate, yes, but the new technology could be Russia's salvation. All that was needed was time to work through the problems.

"Time and lots of rubles, Nikolaevich, which we do not have," said Commissar Volkov, chief of the Soviet Navy Political Directorate. He had at last agreed to see Rastakov after repeated requests from the admiral. Spread out on the desktop between the two men were the photographs taken inside the *Tigron*. Volkov, a notorious chain smoker, lit a fresh cigarette.

"And there is something more I must tell you, Comrade Admiral. Anatoly Kryuchkov is dead."

The news stunned Rastakov. Kryuchkov was the scientist responsible for the Svarog Project; the man and the project were one and the same.

"Dead? How?" Rastakov said, trying to gather his wits.

Volkov tilted back in his chair exhaling blue smoke into the air. "The KGB screwed up big time, that is how. They had Kryuchkov under surveillance, but a week after the *Tigron* accident, he slipped away. They found his clothes folded neatly on the bank of the Moscow River. Two days later the body washed up down river. Most of his flesh had been eaten away.

"Do they know for certain it was Kryuchkov?"

"He was wearing a medical necklace."

Rastakov waited as the Volkov took another puff on his cigarette.

“They checked his dental records. A positive match.”

“It could have been an accident, not suicide.”

“There was a note.”

“What did it say?”

“That he was responsible for the accident and the death of so many men, could not live with the burden of guilt, that sort of thing. Kryuchkov was most upset that his discovery was being used by the military. He objected vigorously.” Here Volkov waved his hand as ashes fell on the carpet. “But none of us has the luxury to please only himself. Is that not so, Comrade Admiral? We serve for the good of the state.”

Rastakov had spoken with Kryuchkov in person only twice, but he had heard through the grapevine that the scientist was unhappy working for the military.

“Certainly we can continue without him,” he said.

“I am afraid not.” The knell of fatalism in his superior’s voice was unmistakable.

“Why not?”

“Because our little inventor destroyed critical project data. Again the KGB cannot say how he gained access to the computer files and drawings, but he did, and they are gone.”

What incompetence! What waste! He pleaded with Volkov to resurrect the Svarog Project but was reminded that the project, like its inventor, was dead. End of story.

As for the Communists, Rastakov knew it would not be long until they were finished as well. In time the organized criminal gangs would take control of Mother Russia, aided and abetted by corrupt officials like Volkov. Well, as far as he was concerned, they could have her. He would go back to his fishing.