

CHAPTER ONE

JULY 25, 2003

Judgment Day came without warning.

Captain First Rank Dmitri Losenko sipped tea from a warm ceramic mug as he updated the ship's log in the privacy of his stateroom aboard the Delta IV nuclear submarine K-115. His lean, hawk-like features were clean-shaven. Strands of silver had begun to infiltrate his short brown hair. Medals and insignia gleamed upon his dark blue uniform. Shrewd gray eyes focused intently on his work.

His personal quarters were as trim and impeccably organized as the man himself. Steam rose from the brass samovar resting on his desk. Polished wood panelling covered steel bulkheads. The cotton sheets of his bunk were fitted and folded with the careful precision and attention to detail that life aboard a submarine demanded.

A multifunction display screen, mounted adjacent to the bunk, allowed him to check on the sub's tactical status at a glance. A dog-eared copy of *War and Peace* awaited his leisure. As a loyal officer in the new Russian Navy, Losenko had commanded this vessel for more than a year now. He liked to think that he was prepared for both war and peace—and that he played a vital role in preserving the latter.

It was a routine watch aboard K-115, christened the *Gorshkov* after the father of the modern Russian Navy. 150 meters below the frozen surface of the Barents Sea, the sub patrolled silently, bearing its deadly cargo of ballistic missiles. For nearly twenty years, through the Cold War and beyond, K-115 and the rest of the Northern Fleet had held its fire, always returning to port without unleashing thermonuclear hell upon the world.

Alone in his cabin, Losenko had no expectation that this mission would end otherwise. He looked forward to returning to his dacha outside St. Petersburg after another successful run. The countryside was beautiful in the summer.

A squawk from the intercom disturbed his reverie. Losenko put down his tea and plucked the microphone from its cradle. A black plastic cord—kept scrupulously free of tangles—connected the mike to the speaker system.

“Captain's quarters,” he said brusquely, his voice deep. “What is it?”

The voice of Alexei Ivanov, his executive officer, or starpom, escaped the mike.

“Captain. We've received an urgent communication from Fleet Command.”

Losenko arched an eyebrow. “I'll be right there.”

Abandoning his logbook, the captain rose to his feet. His black leather boots resounded against the steel deck plates as he strode down the corridor. Unlike a surface ship—subject to the choppy motion of the waves—the submarine's deck remained steady and level beneath his feet. If not for the constant thrum of the ship's

engines in the background, there was little indication that the vessel was moving. Cables and conduits grew like ivy over the bulkheads. The freshly scrubbed air was a comfortable twenty degrees Celsius. A double hull shielded him from the black, frigid water outside the sub. As always, he found comfort and pride in the efficiency and reliability of the machine he commanded. What does Moscow want now? he fretted. Worry furrowed his brow. I was not expecting any new orders.

A brisk march brought him quickly to the central command post, which lay only one compartment aft of the officers' quarters. As he entered, his ears were instantly assaulted by emergency alert signals which reverberated from the radio shack just beyond the command center. At best he could only pick out random words and phrases erupting from the speakers.

Rows of illuminated instruments, gauges, and control panels lined the walls of the compact chamber, which was roughly the size of the kitchen in a small Moscow apartment. Two cylindrical periscopes, one optical, the other electronic, rose like bolted metal pillars from the center of a raised platform overlooking the control room. Alert submariners manned their posts, their postures straightening somewhat upon the captain's entrance. Striped black shirts could be glimpsed beneath their dark blue jumpsuits.

Toward the bow, the diving officer stood watch over the helmsmen as they operated the planes and rudder by manipulating a pair of large steering wheels. A digital depth display confirmed that the ship was currently at 150 meters below the ice. A fathometer measured the remaining distance to the ocean floor.

"Captain in CCP," the chief of the watch announced over the nearby din.

Captain Second Rank Ivanov surrendered the conn to Losenko, who joined the younger officer on the periscope pedestal. A fit young man with slick black hair, striking violet eyes, and the face of a poet, the first officer was sometimes teased by his peers for his matinee-idol good looks. Ivanov thrust a paper printout at his commander. His bearing was suitably professional, but Losenko knew his young protege well enough to catch the tension in his voice. The captain realized at once that something was seriously amiss.

"This arrived via ELF," Ivanov announced. The Gorshkov boasted a loop antennae in its sail capable of receiving extra low frequency radio messages even as the vessel traveled at great depths. Losenko quickly scanned the communique—and his heart skipped a beat. Despite his training and experience, he had to resist an urge to grab onto a railing to steady himself. Printed in stark black and white, the words before him were every commander's worst nightmare. And a death sentence for the world he knew.