

One

For terrifying seconds the old soldier could not remember where he was bivouacked—against which army, on what front, in what war. He knew only he was under attack. Then the approaching brushfire crackle of small arms was obliterated by the close concussion of an exploding grenade, shattering the old man's anesthetic dreams. With a startled cry, Colonel General Rodion Marchenko awoke to danger.

He grabbed for his rifle, cracked his knuckles instead against the birch headboard of the old Swedish sleigh bed—a grand-father's wedding present that had followed the Marchenkos on postings from Havana to southern Sakhalin. The colonel general was, therefore, not on bivouac, but ensconced in his own quarters... which were... he ransacked his brains... yes! in a pine and birch forest southwest of Novosibirsk—a training battalion cantonment in the heart of the Siberian Military District.

But the firefight was no illusion. Outside, machine-guns stitched the night, and another grenade blast shook the ground and Marchenko's cabin. *The Chekist sons of bitches were coming for him at last*, he concluded, *and armed with more than an arrest warrant*. The room was pitch black, the bedside digital clock off, the telephone dead against his ear. If power and phone lines were both cut, radio frequencies would be jammed as well. And where in hell was Junior Sergeant Prokhov, his indispensable aide-de-camp? Already dead? Or safely away, as would befit a *stukach*, KGB stooge, a role which Marchenko had more than once suspected the ambitious lad of playing.

The old man's bare feet hit the cold pine floor. He craved his spectacles but dared not take time to grope for them in the dark. He lurched ahead, tripped over his slippers, toppled an ivory Kwan Yin from her candlestand as he plowed into the adjoining office to his campaign desk. It took long, maddening seconds to locate the emergency power switch recessed in the kneehole, but—God be praised!—after a few fitful gulps the seldom-used generator kicked in, feeding juice to the brass desk lamp.

The colonel general's eyes swept once across the scarred mahogany surface, cluttered with the memorabilia of a long, illustrious career. He lingered a moment over two gilt-framed photographs—of the beloved wife now eleven years buried, and the gangly daughter posed in front of her dacha with only the paw of her plump sewing-machine-commissar husband visible after Marchenko's careful scissor-cropping.

Do svidanya, my darlings, he bid them silently as he reached out to the desk's right corner and the meter-high replica of the *Golub I*. The rocket model, with its stylized dove insignia, was tethered to a thin launch rod and sheathed in a gleaming white silo tube. As Deputy Commander of Strategic Rocket Forces back in the early Seventies, Marchenko had championed the development of this prototype missile and its subsequent military deployment as the SS-9 Scarp.

The colonel general unscrewed the protruding nose cone, where the SS-9's twenty-five-megaton warhead would have been housed, and set it beside him. From the desk's left double drawer he extracted a bottle of Stolichnaya, uncapped that as well, gulped the ninety-proof liquid fire. Gunfire continued to erupt as the old officer opened the middle drawer, withdrew a sheet of

his stationery, a favorite Parker pen, and began outlining in Cyrillic script, now grown palsied, the essential points of his final operational order. He worked quickly against the crescendo of weaponry and a new and ominous sound—the grinding approach of battle vehicles.

After the final slashes of his signature—R. I. Marchenko—the colonel general blotted hastily and folded the paper into a tight square, heedless of the smearing of any patches of still-wet ink.

Outside in the dark compound three BTR-70 armored personnel carriers converged on Marchenko's pine-log residence, their 7.62-millimeter turret machine guns trained on his door. From each dark, slab-sided vehicle—through roof hatches and between-wheel hull doors—a stream of smaller shapes emerged against the moonless night to swiftly encircle the structure. These were KGB commandos in black body armor and nonreflective ballistic helmets with headset radios, a dozen from each APC, armed with AKR submachine guns, 9-millimeter pistols and grenades.

The operation thus far had been as effortless as a practice run-through. The little camp had been stripped of regular army units during the previous weeks. The remaining “shadow battalion,” comprising only a few training officers and reservists, had yielded to the attackers with the predictable ease of a regimental whore. The BTR 8x8s had encountered no mobile patrols outside the perimeter, and a single concentrated fusillade took out both the undermanned guard posts.

Only a small core of soldiers had fallen back toward their commander's quarters, but these had fought the mechanized advance bravely, if quite futilely. They were cut down, one after another, by the BTR machine-gunners with the aid of their laser optics, or were blown up, along with their hiding places, by 30-millimeter grenades from the BTR's roof-mounted launchers. The bullet-riddled corpse of the last of these defenders now lay heaped across the single step to Marchenko's cabin, forming a final pitiful barricade—until it was booted aside by Pavel Starkov, lieutenant colonel, KGB Second Directorate for Counterintelligence.

Starkov paused a moment while a specialist sergeant placed explosive frame charges around the door. The faintly lighted window had surprised Starkov; there had been no mention in the briefing of any auxiliary power unit in the camp. Through the window only a bare anteroom was visible; Marchenko must be in the bedroom or office beyond. Perhaps the old Cossack was preparing a boobytrap—or his own suicide. In any case, the decision had come down from KGB chief Biryukov himself, or perhaps from even higher. Starkov was to take his men in without benefit of CS gas or stun grenades, and hold his fire. Biryukov wanted certain questions put to the old man before he was executed.

Starkov started a count into his headset. On five, front and rear doors were blown apart. The lieutenant colonel led the charge through the anteroom and into the office beyond; seconds later the rear assault unit burst in, all half-dozen commandos instantly fanning out and targeting their short-barreled AKRs on the stoop-shouldered old man sitting behind the desk in his nightshirt.

“Who the fuck are you guys supposed to be?” Marchenko addressed the encircling commandos as though he were conducting inspection. To Starkov's considerable relief, the colonel general was unarmed—unless he was planning to chuck that half-empty bottle of vodka at them, or use his desktop rocket model as a bludgeon. Out of uniform, the old man looked frail, almost cadaverous, his sharp Ukrainian features shriveled, the papery skin jaundiced in the lamplight.

Starkov stepped forward and raised his polycarb visor. “Lieutenant Colonel Pavel Starkov, Military Counterintelligence.”

“SMERSH!” the old man spat. “What kept you? I’ve been expecting you vermin for months now.”

“Traitors have reason to expect us. Unless you confess your crimes at once, Rodion Igorovich, and tell us everything, you will be shot here and now.” As an added insult to the senior officer, Starkov had employed the familiar form of address.

“Confess what? What’s my treason?”

“Conspiracy to assassinate President Rybkin.”

Marchenko tilted the vodka bottle to his lips. Starkov—along with his men—couldn’t help noticing the military honors arrayed on the wall behind the colonel general—Hero of the Soviet Union, orders of Suvorov, Kutuzov, Aleksandr Nevsky and the Red Star, decorations and flashes for battle wounds in Egypt, Vietnam, Afghanistan.

“If it’s treason to want to stop Alois Maksimovich from destroying our homeland, I’m guilty, and so is most of the Red Army—and so should you be, Comrade Chekist. I am a patriot. Rybkin is the traitor. Which is, of course, why he sends thugs in the middle of the night to execute me. He’s afraid to put me on trial. He knows he’d have a full-scale Army revolt on his hands.”

“Is that your whole confession, Rodion Igorovich?”

“All you’re going to get, shitface. So why don’t you give the order? Come on, you bastards, shoot me!” All eyes were on Starkov, who did not react. The old man snorted. “What are you waiting for? Did Rybkin hand you a list of questions to ask before you can pull the trigger? Like why I’ve been such a docile fellow, making no protest when he stripped me of my rocket command and exiled me to this shithole? The answer is simple. I *like* teaching *kolkhoz* boys how to dig latrines in the spring mud.” Marchenko chuckled, took another pull of vodka, banged the bottle down, wiped his lips. “Either that, or I’ve got one last ace up my asshole.”

“If you’ve got an ace hidden anywhere, old man, you’ve waited too long to play it against Rybkin.”

“I was waiting for just the right moment. And now it’s here. I *will* stop this madman, Comrade Chekist, and you and your stormtroopers cannot stop me.”

“We already have, Comrade General. We’ve been watching you for months, you know, tracing your treasonous little network. We’re shutting it down completely tonight. Removing your conspirators in a dozen military districts. And we know from our interrogations that your plans for overthrowing the President are a very long way from complete.”

“For overthrowing, yes. Not for killing the bastard. For that I just have to give the word.”

“Go ahead. I’d like to see this, Comrade, since we’ve severed every means of communication from this place.”

Marchenko finished the bottle, set it down gently this time. “Alas for your ass-licking career, Comrade Chekist, you have overlooked one means of communication.”

“What?”

“Pigeon.”

Starkov stared at the old rocketry general without comprehension. Marchenko acted tipsy; was he delusional as well? Yet, despite himself, the KGB officer raked his glance once more over the small office—past books, encased medals and orders, dusty regalia that included a cavalry saber and saddle, photos of rocket launchings, family gatherings, officer academy graduations. There were no carrier pigeons, no birds of any kind.

“Pigeon?” Starkov said, at a loss.

Marchenko smiled for the first time, revealing several stainless-steel teeth. He tapped the rocket tube and repeated the word: *Golub*, “dove” or “pigeon.” Then he pressed the wireless ignition switch concealed in his palm.

From the base of the *Golub* there came an explosive whoosh, and the projectile, in a compressed-gas cold launch, shot out of its silo tube toward the roof—and a skylight that flew open before it, framing a square of night.

Startled, Starkov and several others swung their AKRs, firing upward bursts at the vanishing missile. It seemed they had hit their target when a gout of flame exploded over their heads. Then his stunned senses registered the diminishing roar and a sudden sulfurous stink in the room, and Starkov realized the explosion must have been the delayed ignition of the first-stage rocket motor. The *Golub* had disappeared into the night.

Yet several of his men continued to direct their machine-gun rounds upward, thudding into the roof timbers and shattering the rapidly retracting plexiglass skylight. And worse! Starkov whirled and shouted—too late to stop one of his men from opening fire on Marchenko, who crashed backward off his chair. By the time Starkov had rushed around the desk, the colonel general had escaped their grasp like his “pigeon.” His nightshirt was a red ruin, and from the scrawny neck arterial blood pooled over the floorboards, dividing around Starkov’s boots.

The KGB officer stared down in impotent fury, his right fist clenching and reclinching the AKR’s butt-stock. Marchenko’s broad skull was thrown back on the floor, his death-glazed eyes staring up at the shattered skylight and blackness beyond. And the old bastard was still grinning his steely smile.

The *Golub* streaked northeastward through the Siberian night like a tiny meteorite, perhaps a straggler from the Eta Aquarid showers of early May, a week previous. Its trajectory was precisely controlled by a tiny Japanese microprocessor, and its solid-fuel propellant burned for a carefully calculated one hundred forty seconds, enough to carry it over twenty kilometers of pine and birch, and well beyond the silent River Ob and the university complex of Akademgorodok sprawled across the *Zolotaya Dolina*, the Golden Valley.

As it passed once again above dense forest, the rocket reached apogee and abruptly cut its motor. A split-second later a recovery ejection charge triggered, the sudden retro-thrust separating the nosecone and deploying a parachute. As the exhausted first stage dropped away into the trees, the polyethylene canopy unfurled and snapped open. The *Golub* payload, swinging slightly in the breeze and now emitting a tiny radio signal, drifted down through the pinetops, its shrouds barely evading entrapment as it slipped past tiers of web-fingered boughs to impact softly into the thick mulch of a small clearing.

An hour passed with only the rustle of pines. Then the wind carried the approaching whine of a truck transmission laboring over the rough ground. Several minutes later twin headlamps lanced back and forth through the night as the vehicle crashed through thickets and slalomed around pine boles. Finally it bounced into the clearing—an old, rebuilt Lend-Lease Studebaker bearing the insignia of the Ministry of Timber—and came to a halt.

Leaving the motor running and the headlamps probing ahead, two men jumped out of the cab—a father swinging an electric torch, and his strapping son with an RDF receiver. It took them less than a minute to locate the payload under its collapsed canopy. In another minute, the old Studebaker was growling off through the woods, and the clearing was once again empty.

A half-hour later, the *Golub*’s nosecone lay hidden beneath the winter woodpile outside the forester’s cabin, while inside Marchenko’s final operational order was carefully unfolded, read,

encrypted and sent on its way once more, this time disguised in a stream of meteorological data over the Akademgorodok computer network for distribution throughout the Soviet Union. The last sentence of the colonel general's message was the key one. Decoded, it read simply:

ACTIVATE MARCUS.