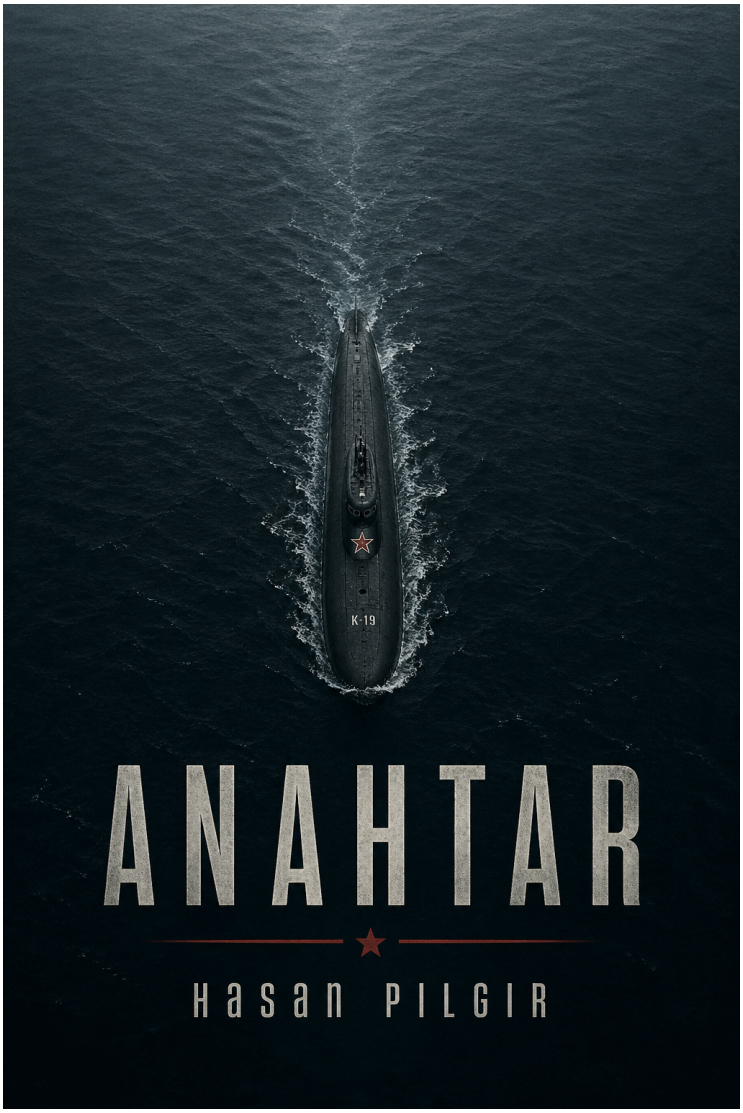
ANAHTAR



Part One: Scramble

Boots on wet concrete. That was the first sound, before the engines, before the orders — boots on wet concrete and the slow industrial breathing of the pier cranes shifting their weight in the dark.

The floodlights over Pier Four turned the water the color of used motor oil. K-52 lay against the rubber fenders the way an old dog lies against a wall, heavy and patient and not quite asleep. *Verkhoyansk*, in faded Cyrillic on her sail. The men called her Vera. They had always called her Vera. Tonight, walking past her in the rain, none of them did.

Captain First Rank Sergei Viktorovich Morozov stood at the head of the brow with his cap level and his hands at his sides. He was forty-nine years old, a thin man, narrow at the shoulders, the gray in his beard cut close. He had been told twenty-two minutes ago that the boat was sailing. He had been told nineteen minutes ago that he would not be told why.

Sailors moved past him onto the deck. He counted them without appearing to count. He noted the ones whose tunics were misbuttoned and the ones who carried nothing — no kit bag, no second pair of boots, nothing. A young michman went by with a duffel that still had the laundry tag pinned to it. Behind him a torpedoman in a civilian jacket, the rain darkening the wool. Morozov did not stop them. He looked at each face once, briefly, the way a priest looks at a coffin.

Captain Second Rank Pavel Andreyevich Sokolov came down the brow at a half-run and stopped at his elbow. The first officer was thirty-six, square-built, clean-shaven to the point of severity. He saluted out of habit even though they were standing two meters apart.

"Reactor's warm," Sokolov said. "Anisimov says forty minutes."

"Tell him thirty."

"He won't like it."

"He doesn't have to like it."

Sokolov did not move yet. There was a small thing in his face that he was working out whether to say. Morozov gave him the second of silence to decide.

"Six men still ashore," Sokolov said. "Two are in the city. One is a torpedoman, one is —"

"Leave them."

Sokolov's jaw set. "Sir."

"Note it in the log. Names, ranks, last known. I want it correct."

"Yes, sir."

He went back up the brow. Morozov watched him go and thought, briefly and without pleasure, that Sokolov was a man who had never in his life left anyone behind, and that this was the first time he was learning what it cost.

The wind shifted. Diesel, brine, a thread of something burnt from the shore — perhaps the bakery on Lenina Street, perhaps not. Morozov turned his face out of it and walked up the brow himself.

In the missile compartment the lights were already on full. Captain Third Rank Mikhail Olegovich Baranov stood beneath the third tube with a clipboard that he did not need and a pen that he was not using. He was checking the seals by eye. He had checked them by eye three hours ago, when the boat was scheduled for a maintenance cycle and he had been planning to take his daughter to a puppet theater on Saturday. The puppet theater was on Saturday. This was Wednesday. A great many things had moved.

A warrant officer named Kuzin stood at his shoulder and waited.

"Tube four," Baranov said. "Pressure."

"Nominal."

"Read it to me."

Kuzin read it to him. Baranov nodded once. He moved to tube five. He did this for each of them. He had done it for each of them at the start of every patrol of his career, and he did it now in the same voice, with the same small economical movements, and Kuzin, who had served with him for two years, understood with a sudden dropping feeling in his stomach that the captain third rank was frightened.

Baranov was not frightened of the missiles. He was frightened because the order had come down with a code group he had only ever seen in exercises, and even in exercises only twice.

He kept his face flat and walked to tube six.

In the radio room Starshina Ilya Romanovich Belov had his headphones on one ear and his thumb on the dial of the secondary set. He was twenty-four. He had a wife in Severodvinsk and a habit of humming Vysotsky under his breath when he was thinking. He was not humming now.

The fleet net was strange.

It was not silent — silence he would have understood. Silence happened. Silence had a shape. This was not silence. This was the wrong kind of traffic. Routine call signs were absent. An auxiliary frequency that ought to have been carrying weather was carrying a tone, a flat unmodulated tone, the kind they used for a held channel. Two encrypted bursts had come through in the last ten minutes, both very short, both addressed to vessels he did not recognize by pennant.

He wrote down what he heard. He wrote down what he did not hear. The second list was longer.

Lieutenant Artyom Sergeyevich Kravtsov leaned in through the doorway. He was the sonar officer, twenty-nine, lean, with the raw red knuckles of a man who washed his hands too often.

"Anything?"

"Not for us," Belov said. "Not yet."

Kravtsov looked at the second list. He read it the way a doctor reads a chart.

"Nothing from Northern Fleet HQ at all?"

"One. Twelve minutes ago. Three groups."

"Three?"

Belov nodded. Three groups was a sailing order. Three groups was also, on certain days that had been drilled and never used, something else. He did not say so. Kravtsov did not ask.

"All right," Kravtsov said, and went forward.

Podpolkovnik Dmitri Arkadyevich Zorin was in the wardroom, because there was nowhere else for him to be. He had come aboard at 0340 with a leather case and a sealed envelope and a pass signed at a level that had made the duty officer's hand shake taking it. He was a slight man, gray-suited under his greatcoat, with a face that gave away nothing because there was very little in it to give. He drank tea. He had been offered the tea by a steward who had not looked at him.

Doctor Elena Mikhailovna Orlova came in, saw him, and almost turned around. She did not. She crossed to the samovar instead and poured a glass for herself and stood with her back to him while it cooled. She was forty-one, a small woman, dark-haired, with the kind of competent hands that had stopped a man's bleeding in a Pacific port once and had not been quite steady afterward.

"Doctor," Zorin said, behind her.

"Yes."

"You have your manifest of medications."

It was not a question.

"Yes."

"I would like a copy."

She turned. She looked at him over the rim of the tea glass. She thought, very clearly and very briefly: *he is not a doctor and he does not care about medications and he is asking me this because he wants to know if I will give him things without a fight.*

"Of course," she said. "I'll bring it after we sail."

He inclined his head a quarter of an inch. She left the wardroom without drinking the tea.

In the passageway she passed a young seaman, an electrician's mate, who was buttoning his tunic with one hand because the other held a paper bag. Inside the bag was a sandwich his mother had pressed into it at the gate. She had not been allowed onto the pier. He had not been allowed off. They had spoken through the wire for perhaps a minute. He had not eaten the sandwich. He would not eat it. He would carry it down with him and put it in his locker, and four days from now, when he opened the locker for a clean shirt, the smell of the bread would make him sit down on the deck plates and put his face in his hands, and a torpedoman he did not know well would step over him and say nothing, because by then there would be nothing to say.

Orlova did not see all of that. She saw the boy, and the bag, and his hand on the buttons. She put her palm flat on his shoulder as she passed and said, "Eat something tonight. That's an order."

"Yes, doctor."

She went on.

In the engineering spaces Captain Second Rank Nikolai Petrovich Anisimov had his hand on a steam line and was listening to it the way other men listened to their wives. He was fifty-two. He had been on this boat, on and off, for nineteen years. He knew where she leaked. He knew which valves were honest and which lied. He knew the particular note the starboard turbine made at sixty percent that meant nothing and the slightly different note at sixty percent that meant everything, and tonight she was making neither, which was its own kind of warning, because Vera always made some sound and tonight she was being quiet for him.

A michman came up with a clipboard. "Captain wants thirty minutes."

Anisimov did not look up. "Captain can have thirty-five."

"He said thirty."

"Then thirty-five."

The michman waited. Anisimov took his hand off the line, wiped it on a rag that had stopped being any color years ago, and said, "Tell him thirty-two and bring me Pyotr from the auxiliary panel. Go."

The michman went. Anisimov put his hand back on the steam line. He spoke to the boat under his breath. *Slowly, old woman. Slowly. We're going out.*

At 0512 the brow came up. At 0514 the lines came in. At 0517 the tugs took her, and the *Verkhoyansk* moved away from Pier Four with the slow indifference of something very large and very tired that has been woken up.

Morozov stood on the bridge in the sail with Sokolov half a step behind him and a junior officer at the voicepipe. The rain had thinned to a mist. The shore lights smeared on the wet steel. A patrol boat sat off the harbor mouth with its running lights doused, which was wrong, and a second patrol boat sat behind it, which was more wrong, and beyond them, where there should have been three merchantmen at anchor waiting for the morning pilots, there was nothing at all.

Sokolov saw it. He did not speak.

The harbormaster's voice came up the line, thin and formal. "*Verkhoyansk*, you are clear of the channel. Good hunting."

It was the wrong phrase. It was not a phrase used for departing patrols. It was older than that, and uglier, and a man on the harbormaster's staff had used it without thinking, perhaps because no one had given him the right one tonight.

Morozov took the handset.

"Acknowledged," he said. "*Verkhoyansk* clear."

He gave the handset back. He looked once, briefly, at the lights of the base falling away — the sodium yellows, the sour reds of the warning beacons, the single white square that was the window of the duty office where someone he had known for twenty years was, presumably, still standing — and then he turned his face forward, into the dark, and did not look back.

"Take her down to the deep water line, Pavel Andreyevich."

“Tak tochno, Kapitan."

They cleared the headland. The swell came up under her and Vera shouldered into it the way she had always shouldered into it, and the men in the sail felt, through their boots and their bones, the old animal wakefulness of a submarine going to sea.

At the deep water line Morozov dropped down through the hatch. Sokolov followed. The lookouts came down. The hatch was dogged. In the control room the red night-lighting made every face the same face.

"Make your depth eighty meters," Morozov said. "Course three-four-zero. Speed twelve."

The orders went around the room in low voices. The deck tilted, very slightly, under their feet.

Belov, in the radio shack, took the headphones off his ear and set them down. He logged the time. He looked at the second hand of the bulkhead clock as it crossed the twelve.

"Radio silence," he said, to no one in particular.

The sea closed over them.

Part Two: Route

At eighty meters the boat changed her voice. She did not become silent — submarines never become silent, the men who said so were men who had only read about them — but she became, after the first hour, a different kind of loud. The hum of the ventilation. The small percussive tick of a fitting cooling somewhere aft. The slow respiratory pulse of the trim pumps. The men learned, without being told, to fit their own sounds into the boat's. They closed cabinet doors with their palms instead of letting the latches snap. They put their cups down on rags. A torpedoman in the forward room sneezed once and apologized to no one in particular, and three men looked at him.

The red lighting made everything the color of an old wound. In the control room the chronometer above the helm read 0743. Above them, somewhere, the sun had come up. Down here it had not.

Morozov stood at the chart table with his hands flat on either side of the laid course and looked at the line a navigator had drawn for him three hours before they sailed. The line went north-

northwest. It crossed the GIUK gap not at its widest but at its meanest, between two undersea ridges that NATO had been seeding with sensors since before the navigator was born. It did not deviate. It did not feint. It went where it went because someone in Severomorsk had wanted the *Verkhoyansk* in a particular box of water by a particular hour, and had drawn the shortest line between her berth and that box, and had handed the line down. It was not a bastion route. That was the first wrong thing about it.

He thought, not for the first time and without heat: *they did not draw this to hide us. They drew it to put us somewhere quickly.*

He did not say it. He took a pencil from the rail and made a small notation in the corner of the chart — a private one, in his own hand, two letters and a time — and put the pencil back.

Sokolov came up at his shoulder. The first officer had not slept. The skin under his eyes had the gray sheen of a man running on tea and discipline.

"Soundings nominal," Sokolov said. "Helm answering. Anisimov reports the starboard turbine is steady at twelve knots, but he wants to know if we'll hold here."

"We hold here until the bathymetry opens. Then we go to fifteen."

"Yes, sir."

Sokolov did not move. Morozov let him stand a moment.

"The six men," Sokolov said. He said it to the chart, not to Morozov.

"Yes."

"I sent the names up to Belov for the log. Two of them — Karpov and the boy from the auxiliary watch, Volkov — they were in the city because of leave I signed."

"I know."

"I was thinking. If the order had come twenty minutes later, they'd have been aboard."

Morozov did not look at him. "If the order had come twenty minutes earlier, four others would not have been."

Sokolov was quiet.

"We sailed with the men we had, Pavel Andreyevich. That is what we did. Write it that way."

"Yes, Captain."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir."

He went. Morozov stood with his palms on the chart and felt, through the table and the deck plates, the boat moving north under him at the speed of a man walking quickly through a field.

In the sonar shack Lieutenant Kravtsov sat with his eyes closed. This was the position in which he heard best. The displays were in front of him, the waterfall scrolling its slow green snowfall down the screens, but Kravtsov listened first and looked second, because his predecessor — a man named Smirnov who had taught him on the *Tula* and was now retired and growing tomatoes outside Murmansk — had told him that the eye lies to the ear and the ear does not lie back.

He had been listening for three hours and he had not heard anything that mattered.

That was itself information.

In a normal patrol there were always things. The slow industrial rumble of a freighter forty kilometers off. The throb of a fishing fleet working a bank. Cetacean calls. The whine of a research array somewhere being patient. He had heard none of these in the past hour. The sea around them was, in the wrong way, clean.

He opened his eyes and looked at the waterfall. He watched a single thin trace come down through the noise floor and dissolve and come down again two minutes later, two hertz lower, and dissolve again.

He sat forward.

"Belov."

The communications starshina put his head around the bulkhead.

"Time."

"Eight oh four."

"Mark this. Eight oh four, transient bearing two-eight-five. Twice. Two minutes apart."

"Mark."

Kravtsov pressed one cup of the headphones harder against his ear with the heel of his hand. He waited. The trace came down a third time, on the same bearing, two hertz lower again.

He stood up.

"Officer of the deck."

The OOD looked over.

"Notify the captain. I have a possible. Bearing two-eight-five, no range, no classification. Three transients, descending tone, regular interval. I'd like to slow."

The OOD lifted the handset. Morozov was on the bridge in under a minute.

"Show me."

Kravtsov showed him. Morozov bent over the screen with one hand braced on the back of the operator's chair. He did not put his face close to the display the way younger officers did. He looked at it the way a man looks at an X-ray of someone he loves.

"Could be a buoy," Kravtsov said. "Could be a tow. Could be a transmission from one of theirs to another. The descent is regular but the spacing is loose. I want another six minutes."

"You have them."

He turned to the OOD. "Reduce to four knots. Rig for ultra-quiet. Make your depth one-four-zero meters. Course unchanged. No active sonar."

"Reduce to four knots, ultra-quiet, one-four-zero, course unchanged, aye."

The orders went out in the thinned voices the boat had been using all morning. The deck tilted very gently. The hum of the ventilation dropped a quarter step. Somewhere aft a man stopped using a power tool and the silence where its sound had been was, for a moment, louder than the sound had been. Kravtsov heard a junior rate down the passage drop something soft — a rag, a sock — and the rate flinched, expecting a noise that did not come, and then breathed.

The fourth transient came down the screen. Same bearing. Two hertz lower.

"Descending," Kravtsov said.

"Toward us or away?"

"Can't say yet. The frequency drift is too slow for a doppler call. Give me ten minutes."

Morozov gave him ten minutes. He stood at the chart table the entire time and did not speak, and the men in the control room, observing this, lowered their voices another notch on their own.

In engineering Anisimov had taken his jacket off. He had it folded over a pipe behind him, where the steam line was warm but not hot, because if a man was going to leave his jacket somewhere it was reasonable to leave it somewhere it would dry. He stood in front of the auxiliary panel with a michman named Pyotr and a warrant officer named Gusev and he was conducting, in low voices, the kind of conversation he had conducted perhaps two thousand times in his career and no longer needed to think about.

"Number two pump."

"On standby."

"Take it off standby. Bring up number three."

"Three's the loud one, Captain."

"Three's the *honest* one. Two whistles at low load. I won't have it whistling tonight."

Pyotr brought up number three. Number three came up with a small cough and then settled, and Anisimov listened to it with his head tilted the way a man listens to a child's chest, and after a count of perhaps fifteen seconds he nodded.

"There," he said. "That's her."

Gusev wrote it in the log. He wrote it in pencil. The deck was steady but he wrote in pencil because Anisimov wrote in pencil and the auxiliary log of the *Verkhoyansk* had been kept in pencil for nineteen years.

The boat slowed under them. Anisimov felt it in the soles of his feet and in a fitting above his head that stopped its small habitual tick when the load came off.

"Ultra-quiet," he said, before the order came down.

"How did you —"

"Because she just told me."

Gusev did not write that down.

The order came down a moment later, formally, through the speaker, in Sokolov's clipped voice, and Anisimov nodded as though confirming something a colleague had said.

"All right," he said, to the panel and to Pyotr and to the boat. "Slow and small. We'll do slow and small. Tell Vasilev not to run the lathe. Tell the cooks not to drop anything. Tell the man in the head to piss against the porcelain and not into the water." He looked at Pyotr. "Don't actually tell him that last one. Just go quiet, all of you. Go."

Pyotr went.

Anisimov put his palm flat on the bulkhead. The bulkhead was cool. The bulkhead was always cool here, because the sea outside was four degrees Celsius and the steel did not pretend otherwise. He spoke to it under his breath, in the affectionate ugly diminutive a man uses for an old wife or an old mare:

"*Tikho, staraya. Tikho*."

Quiet, old woman. Quiet.

She was quiet.

Belov was not supposed to be listening. Under radio silence the receivers were on the boat's mast-mounted antennae only when the mast was up, and the mast was not up, and would not be up until ordered, and so there was technically nothing for him to do but maintain his logs and make sure his equipment did not develop a fault while idle.

He listened anyway.

The ELF set was on. ELF could reach a submarine at depth; it was the thread by which Moscow could pull on them even down here. The set was on and it was carrying nothing, which was correct, because the schedule of routine ELF traffic was sparse and the next window was not for two hours. He watched the level meters. He watched them not move.

He took out his second list — the list of things that had not happened, that he had begun in port and had been adding to since — and he wrote, in his small careful hand:

0612. Routine met broadcast Northern Fleet — absent. 0700. Hourly maritime advisory civilian — absent.0730. Low-band agricultural net (Arkhangelsk region) — absent.

The agricultural net was not a strategic frequency. It was farmers. It was men in offices reading out wholesale grain prices and weather for collective fields that had not been collective for thirty years but still listened on the same frequency out of habit. Belov had grown up with that frequency on in

his grandmother's kitchen. It came on at 0730 every morning of his life and the only times he could remember it not coming on were the day his grandmother's radio had finally died and one morning in a hard winter when the transmitter mast outside Kotlas had iced over.

It had not come on this morning.

He looked at his list. He underlined the agricultural net entry once, and then, after a moment, again.

He did not tell anyone yet. He was not sure what it was he would be telling.

Doctor Orlova made her morning rounds through the boat at ultra-quiet. She did them in soft shoes. She had three of these, a private extravagance, because the regulation deck shoes squeaked on certain plates and a doctor who squeaked could not surprise a malingerer or comfort a frightened man.

She did not find malingerers this morning.

She found, in the forward berthing, a torpedoman lying on his back fully dressed with his eyes open and his hands folded on his chest like a saint on a tomb. She put two fingers against his throat. His pulse was a hundred and ten. She said his name softly. He blinked and looked at her and his pulse went down to ninety and stayed there.

"Sleep if you can," she said.

"Yes, doctor."

She found, in the galley, a cook who had been chopping onions for forty minutes and had produced a small mountain of them and was still chopping. She put her hand on his wrist. He stopped. He looked at the onions as if he had not noticed them.

"That's enough onions," she said.

"Yes, doctor."

She found, in the wardroom passage, the boy from the pier with the sandwich. He was off-watch. He had the bag in his hand. He was standing very still with the bag in his hand and looking at the bulkhead.

She did not stop. She walked past him as if she had not seen, because some kinds of looking at a man are themselves a wound, and because she had decided already that she would come back in an hour with tea and sit with him without saying anything for as long as he needed.

In her own compartment she took down the small locked drawer and looked at her sedatives. She had enough for ordinary work. She did not have enough for a boat full of men under prolonged silence, if it came to that. She closed the drawer. She did not reach for it.

She thought: *the Podpolkovnik wants to know what is in this drawer because he wants to know what I can give a man who refuses to launch*. And then she thought: *or what I can give a man who will not be needed to*. And she could not decide which thought was worse.

Zorin found Morozov at the chart table at 0931. He did not announce himself. He simply appeared at the captain's elbow as if he had been there all along, which was a trick of his and was, Morozov suspected, deliberate.

"Captain."

"Podpolkovnik."

"I would like a brief on readiness."

"Captain Third Rank Baranov can give you one."

"I'd prefer it from you."

Morozov did not look up from the chart. "We are at four knots. We are at one hundred forty meters. We are tracking an unclassified contact at bearing two-eight-five. The crew is at ultra-quiet. The reactor is nominal. The missile compartment is in routine readiness state. There has been no order to advance to a higher state, and I have not advanced to one."

"Is the crew stable?"

Morozov turned his head. He looked at Zorin for a count of two.

"The crew is Russian. That is not the same thing."

Zorin's face did not change. He inclined his head the same quarter inch he had given the doctor in the wardroom in port.

"Thank you, Captain."

He went.

Sokolov, who had come up during this exchange and had been waiting at a polite distance, came forward. He did not speak. There was nothing to say. After a moment he and Morozov bent over the chart together and worked, in low voices, on a small adjustment to the next bathymetric leg, and the conversation with the Podpolkovnik was, between them, never mentioned again.

At 1014 Kravtsov said, quietly, "Aircraft."

Morozov was beside him in three steps.

"Where."

"Above. Bearing — bearing's bad, it's high. Sonobuoy splash. One. Now two."

"How close."

"Close. Inside ten kilometers. I'm hearing the impact on the surface, not the device."

"Pattern?"

"Wait."

They waited. The control room had gone, in the last second, to the kind of stillness that is not silence but a refusal of sound. A planesman had his hand on the wheel and was not breathing. The OOD had his pencil halfway to the log and had not moved it.

A third splash.

"Pattern," Kravtsov said. "He's laying a line."

"Toward us or across?"

"Across. So far."

Morozov said, in a voice that was not louder than the voice he had used to order tea: "Make your depth two hundred meters. Course three-five-five. Speed three. No transients."

The orders went around. The deck tilted. The boat went down.

A wrench, somewhere aft, slipped a centimeter on a fitting and made a single bright sound. A starshina caught it before it fell. He held it against his chest with both hands like a child. He was thirty-one years old and he had not prayed since his confirmation but he was praying now, two words, over and over, *prosti menya, prosti menya,* forgive me, forgive me, and it was not clear to him whom he was asking.

The fourth splash came down somewhere off the starboard quarter. The fifth was farther. The sixth was farther still.

"He's walking away," Kravtsov said. He said it in a whisper.

They stayed at two hundred meters and three knots for twenty-six minutes. Kravtsov did not take his hand from the headphone cup. Morozov did not move from the chart table. Sokolov stood beside the OOD with his arms crossed so that no one could see his hands. Anisimov, in engineering, kept his palm on the bulkhead and spoke to the boat in a voice no one else could hear.

At 1042 Kravtsov let his hand fall.

"He's gone," he said. "I lost the splashes ten minutes ago. The transients from earlier — I've lost those too. It's clean."

"Clean," Morozov repeated, without inflection.

"Yes, Captain."

"Resume four knots. Make your depth one-four-zero. Course three-four-zero. Maintain ultra-quiet for the next hour."

"Aye, Captain."

The boat came up to one-four-zero meters at the slowness of a man rising from a bow. Nobody in the control room spoke for a long time afterward. Sokolov uncrossed his arms. The starshina aft put his wrench down on a folded rag. The OOD finished, very carefully, the sentence in his log that he had been writing twenty-six minutes ago, and the handwriting at the end of the sentence was not the same as the handwriting at the beginning, and he did not erase it.

Morozov stood at the chart table and looked at the line going north-northwest, and at the small private notation he had made in the corner three hours before, and did not change it.

At 1108 Belov came forward to the control room himself. He did not send a runner. He came forward holding his second list in his hand, folded once, and he stood at the entrance to the radio shack and waited until Sokolov saw him.

Sokolov came over. Belov gave him the list. Sokolov read it. He read it twice. He looked up.

"None of these have come in?"

"No, sir."

"Since when."

"The fleet met broadcast was the first. Six hours ago."

"The civilian agricultural net."

"It comes on at 0730 every day, sir."

"And today."

"Today it did not."

Sokolov took the list to the chart table without a word and set it down beside Morozov's hand. Morozov read it. He took rather longer to read it than Sokolov had. When he was finished he folded it once more along the existing crease and gave it back to Belov.

"Keep adding to it, Starshina."

"Yes, Captain."

"Quietly."

"Yes, Captain."

Belov went back to his shack. He sat down at his bench. He took out his pencil and his list, and he uncreased it, and he held it for a moment without writing on it, and he thought of his grandmother's kitchen, and the wallpaper she had had with the small blue flowers on it, and the wooden radio on the windowsill that had, every morning of his childhood, at exactly 0730, begun to talk about the price of grain.

He bent his head and he wrote, under the last entry, in the same small careful hand:

1108. Continuing absence, all civilian low-band, all bearings.

He put the pencil down. He sat in the red light. He listened to nothing, on every band he was permitted to listen on, for a very long time.

Above them, the sea was empty in the wrong way.

Ahead of them, the assigned box waited in black water.

Behind them, the world had stopped speaking.

The *Verkhoyansk* turned a quarter degree to true her course, and went on, slow and small, carrying all her unopened fire.

Part Three: What Remained of the Air

They went to fifty-five meters at 1430 and put the trailing wire out at 1437. The wire came up behind them, half a kilometer of it, dragged through the cold like a long thin nerve. Belov sat in the radio shack with his hands flat on his thighs and watched the ELF receiver come into a bandwidth it had not held in nine hours, and waited.

For the first six minutes he heard the sea. The sea had a voice on these frequencies — a slow electromagnetic murmur, ionospheric weather, the whisper of a planet's own machinery — and on a normal patrol he found it comforting, the way some men find rain on a tin roof comforting. He did not find it comforting now.

He turned the gain up a quarter. He waited.

At 1444 a tone began. It was not modulated. It was not addressed. It rose, sat at pitch for what he timed as twenty-two seconds, and cut. He did not recognize it as anything. He wrote it down. He gave it a number — *Fragment 1* — and the time, and the bearing the antenna told him, and the fact that he could not classify it.

At 1451 he found a voice.

It was a woman. The signal was civilian, marine band, weak, drifting. He pressed the headphone harder against his ear with the heel of his hand, the gesture he had picked up from Kravtsov in the months they had served together.

"...if anyone is hearing this, please. Please."

The voice was not screaming. It was the voice of a woman who had stopped being able to scream some time ago, and was using what she had left.

"This is — this is a private vessel. We are. The harbor is not — there is nothing of the harbor. There is nothing in the —"

She broke off. She breathed once, audibly, into the microphone. She was, Belov realized with a small dropping sensation in his chest, holding the handset close enough that he could hear her teeth.

"My husband is dead. I do not know if. The dog is alive. I have water for. If anyone hears this, the position is —"

The signal slid away from him, drifted three kilohertz, and was gone.

He found her again, briefly, two minutes later, on a slightly different frequency. She was reading numbers. She was reading what he understood, after the third pair, to be coordinates, and she was reading them to nobody, because she did not know that nobody was the audience, and she was reading them in a Russian that had the soft pulled vowels of the southern coast, perhaps Taganrog, perhaps further west.

She gave the position twice. She said *please* once more. She said her own first name — Tatyana — as if she had remembered it would matter.

Then she was gone, and Belov could not get her back.

He wrote *Fragment 2* in his book. He wrote her name. He wrote the coordinates she had given. He did not write *please*.

He sat with the pencil in his hand for a long time.

By 1530 he had nine fragments.

Three of them were tones. One was a numbers station broadcasting, in a man's bored voice, the same five-digit group thirty-eight times in a row before it cut off mid-group. One was a religious broadcast on a frequency that ought to have been carrying a state youth program — a male voice reading the Psalms in Old Church Slavonic, very slowly, with no preface and no commentary, as though the reader had walked into the studio and sat down at the microphone and begun reading and intended to keep reading until something stopped him. One was a coded burst that lasted four seconds and carried a prefix Belov recognized from a manual he had read once and never expected to see in operation. One was a foreign station — German, he thought, possibly Austrian — speaking in a calm professional cadence about evacuations and corridors and a number she gave twice that Belov did not understand.

And one, which he kept coming back to, was an automated maritime weather station at Murmansk.

It was working perfectly.

A flat synthesized woman's voice, the same voice that had been reading the Murmansk weather every six minutes for as long as Belov had been in the navy, was reading the Murmansk weather. Wind from the west-northwest at four meters per second. Visibility ten kilometers. Pressure 1014 hectopascals and steady. No significant weather.

Belov listened to the broadcast. He listened to the next one, six minutes later. The wind had shifted by half a degree. The visibility was still ten kilometers. There was no significant weather.

He took the headphones off one ear. He sat with them like that, half on, half off, and his hand on his pencil, and he did not write the weather report down because he did not know yet what column it went in.

Kravtsov came past the door with a cup of tea and stopped.

"You all right?"

Belov did not answer at once. He held up his book. Kravtsov read the open page upside down, the way sonar officers learn to read.

"The weather is normal," Belov said.

"What weather."

"Murmansk."

Kravtsov did not say anything. He stood there. After a moment he set the cup of tea on the deck plates outside the radio shack, very softly, and he went forward to the control room without it.

Morozov read Belov's book at the chart table. He read it the way he had read the chart that morning. He read it twice. Sokolov stood beside him with his arms behind his back. Kravtsov stood at a polite distance, having delivered Belov, who was now in the doorway of his own shack with the book shut in his hands again because the captain had finished with it.

"The Murmansk station is automated," Sokolov said.

"Yes."

"It runs on a backup system."

"Yes."

"It would continue to broadcast even if the city were —"

"Yes, Pavel Andreyevich. I know what it would do."

Sokolov was quiet.

"How long has it been broadcasting nominal weather?"

Belov spoke from the doorway. "Every six minutes, Captain. Without interruption. I have eleven cycles."

"And the harbor at Murmansk?"

"Reports from civilian fishermen on the marine band — none. None at all, sir. Since approximately 0900."

"Other ports."

"Severomorsk silent. Polyarny silent. Arkhangelsk — one private vessel an hour ago. Then nothing."

"Foreign?"

"German civil broadcaster active. Speaking calmly. They are using the word *humanitarian*."

Morozov closed the book. He gave it back to Belov with a small precise gesture, like a man returning a borrowed pen.

"Wardroom," he said. "Twenty minutes. Pavel Andreyevich, Anisimov, Baranov, Orlova, the Podpolkovnik, Kravtsov, yourself, Belov. Bring the book."

"Yes, Captain."

The wardroom was not built for nine people. They sat where they could. Anisimov took the chair at the foot, because he did not like sitting with his back to a door. Orlova sat against the bulkhead with her hands folded in her lap and her shoes flat on the deck. Zorin sat to Morozov's right because

nobody had been quick enough to take the seat first. Baranov sat opposite him with his clipboard on his knees and a small tic working in the muscle of his jaw. The tea on the sideboard was cold and nobody was drinking it.

Morozov did not stand.

"Belov."

Belov read his fragments. He read them in his small flat administrative voice, the voice he had used to read inventories of cable spool to Sokolov for two years, and he did not editorialize. When he came to the woman on the marine band — Tatyana — his voice did not change. When he came to the Murmansk weather station he paused for half a beat before reading the next entry, and the pause was the only editorial in the document.

When he was finished he closed the book and put his hands on top of it.

There was a long silence.

Anisimov spoke first. He spoke without looking up.

"Murmansk."

"Yes," Morozov said.

"My sister lives in Murmansk."

It was not said for sympathy. It was said the way an engineer states a parameter. Anisimov was looking at the table. After a moment he nodded once, to himself, as though confirming something unpleasant about a fitting, and said nothing else.

Baranov shifted his clipboard on his knees. He did not look at Anisimov.

"The coded burst," he said. "The prefix. Belov, the prefix you noted."

"Yes, Captain Third Rank."

"You're certain."

"I am certain of the prefix. I cannot decode the body. It was not addressed to us."

"To whom was it addressed?"

"A pennant I do not recognize. Possibly *Knyaz Vladimir*. Possibly *Aleksandr Nevsky*. The signal was very weak."

Baranov wrote something down. His pencil made a small sound on the paper. Everyone in the wardroom heard it.

Zorin spoke. He had been waiting, Morozov saw, for the right moment, and he had decided that this was it.

"Captain. The fragments are concerning. I do not dispute that. But our task is not to interpret the war. Our task is to remain available to command."

"Yes."

"I would suggest that available means, at minimum, advancing the missile compartment to a higher state of readiness, so that when authenticated orders arrive we are not delayed by procedure."

Baranov did not look up from his clipboard.

Morozov looked at Zorin for several seconds before answering. He did not look angry. He looked like a man examining a fitting that was going to fail.

"A weapon that cannot understand the hand above it is not available, Podpolkovnik. It is loose. I will not advance the readiness state of the missile compartment until I have authenticated guidance from a chain of command whose existence I can verify."

"You believe the chain may not exist."

"I believe the chain has not spoken to us in thirteen hours."

"Captain. With respect. The chain does not need to speak to you in order to exist."

"With respect, Podpolkovnik. It does need to exist in order to issue orders that I am required to execute."

The two men looked at each other across the table. Zorin's face did not change. Morozov's did not either. The thing that passed between them was not a thing that needed faces to carry it.

Sokolov cleared his throat.

"Sir."

"Pavel Andreyevich."

"At what point does verification become part of obedience?"

It was a quiet question. Sokolov asked it looking at his own hands. He had not spoken since the fragments were read. Morozov turned his head slightly to consider him.

"Go on."

"If command has lost picture — if command has lost the picture entirely — then the order, when it comes, may be issued from a position that no longer reflects the situation it presumes to address. Procedure assumes the chain above us is intact and informed. If it is not, then —" he paused, and the pause was the longest thing he had ever done in Morozov's presence — "then procedure is blind, sir. And blindness is not the same as obedience."

Zorin's eyes moved to Sokolov and stayed there. He did not speak.

Morozov did not look at Zorin.

"Note your concern, Pavel Andreyevich. We will return to it."

"Yes, Captain."

"Doctor."

Orlova lifted her head.

"How is the crew."

She thought before answering.

"Until this morning the crew was frightened because they did not know. As of approximately 1600 they are frightened because they are beginning to know. The men I am most worried about are not the ones who are showing it. They are the ones who are not." She paused. "Captain. Men can survive fear. They cannot survive being treated like cargo while carrying the end of the world."

She said it without heat.

Morozov nodded once.

"Anisimov."

"The boat is fine."

"The boat is fine."

"Vera is fine, Captain. She is old and she is tired and she is fine. We can hold this depth and this speed for as long as you require. Give me four hours notice if you intend to surface and I will make her pretty for the cameras." He smiled briefly. The smile was exhausted. "If you intend to launch, I want eight hours to prepare the trim and the tubes properly."

He looked up. He looked at Morozov.

"I do not recommend that you launch, Captain."

He said it as though he were stating a maintenance opinion. Zorin's hand, on the table, made a single small movement and stopped.

"Noted," Morozov said.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Kravtsov."

"Sir."

"What is the sea doing."

Kravtsov hesitated. He looked at the bulkhead behind Morozov, not at Morozov.

"The sea is — Captain, the sea is wrong. I do not have a clean explanation. In the last two hours I have logged three pressure events at extreme range. Beyond two hundred kilometers. I cannot give you a classification. They are not seismic. They are not biological. They are larger than any conventional ordnance I have ever heard, but they are too far away to be sure of anything."

"Explosions."

"Too far to call them that, Captain."

"Then what."

Kravtsov looked at his hands. "Something large," he said, "stopped being one thing."

Nobody spoke.

Morozov let the silence lengthen the exact amount of time he intended it to, and then he closed the meeting.

"Thank you. Resume your stations. Captain Third Rank Baranov — remain."

The room emptied. Zorin went last. He did not say anything as he left. He paused at the doorway, very briefly, with his hand on the frame, and then he went.

Baranov sat with his clipboard on his knees and waited.

Morozov did not speak for a moment. He had taken a small folded cloth from his breast pocket and was wiping his glasses, which he did not need to wipe and which were not his glasses but his father's, kept for nothing. He folded the cloth. He put the glasses back on. He looked at Baranov.

"Mikhail Olegovich."

"Yes, Captain."

"Walk through the procedure for me."

"Sir?"

"From the moment authenticated orders arrive. Walk through every step until the moment of launch. Do not skip anything. I want to hear it from you in this room with the door closed."

Baranov set his clipboard down. He put his hands on his knees. He was not a man who spoke from memory easily, but he had spoken this procedure to himself silently every night of every patrol of his career, the way some men say their prayers, and he spoke it now without pause.

He spoke for nine minutes. He spoke about the first authentication. About the second. About the three-man rule. About the captain's key and the executive officer's key and the missile officer's key. About the safe in the captain's cabin and the safe in the missile control compartment and the codes that were generated only when both were opened in sequence. About the keys themselves.

"They are small," he said. "Captain."

"Yes."

"They are very small. Each one is not larger than the key to a postbox. Mine has a small scratch on the bow. From a screwdriver. I made the scratch in 2019 because I dropped it once and I wanted to know it from the others. It is a stupid scratch. It is not allowed by the manual."

"Mikhail Olegovich."

"Yes, Captain."

"Has anything in the procedure changed since you last reviewed it."

"No, Captain."

"Are the keys in their places."

"Yes, Captain. I checked at 1100."

"Check again."

"Yes, Captain."

Baranov did not stand at once. He looked down at his clipboard. After a moment he said, very quietly, "Captain. May I ask. The wardroom."

"Yes."

"Sokolov's question."

Morozov did not answer.

"I have been asking it also," Baranov said. "For some hours. I have been asking it about the keys."

Morozov looked at him.

"Captain Third Rank Baranov. Your task at this hour is to verify that the keys are in their places, and that the system is in nominal readiness, and not in advanced readiness. That is your task. You are not asked to think about the question Sokolov asked. You are asked to be ready to do your duty as it is given to you."

"Yes, Captain."

"Go and check the keys."

"Yes, Captain."

He stood. He went. At the door he stopped, the way Zorin had, and for a moment Morozov thought he was going to say something else; but he did not. He went out and closed the door behind him with both hands, very softly.

Morozov sat alone in the wardroom for some minutes. He did not move. He looked at the place at the table where Anisimov had been sitting and where the man had said, without looking up, *my sister lives in Murmansk*.

He had known Nikolai Petrovich Anisimov for fifteen years and had never met the sister. He found, with a small distant interest, that he was now thinking about her — a woman he had never seen, in a city he had not visited since the nineties — and that he could not stop thinking about her, and that he was going to have to put her down, the way one puts down a thought that has no use, before he stood up and went back to the control room.

He put her down. He stood up. He went back to the control room.

Belov returned to the radio shack at 1648 and resumed his watch.

The Murmansk weather station was still broadcasting. The wind had shifted by another half-degree. Visibility was still ten kilometers. The pressure had risen by one hectopascal. There was no significant weather.

He listened to two more cycles. He wrote them down. He did not write the wind direction or the pressure or the visibility. He wrote, in his column for Fragment 8: *Cycle 13. Nominal. Cycle 14. Nominal.*

At 1701 a coded burst arrived on the strategic band. It was not addressed to the *Verkhoyansk*. It was addressed to a pennant Belov did not recognize, with a prefix he did. It lasted two seconds. He logged it. He gave it the number 11. He noted that it was the second strategic-prefix burst of the day and that neither had been theirs.

At 1714 he caught Tatyana again.

She was still alive. The signal was much weaker than before, drifting further, and he had her for perhaps eleven seconds in total. She was no longer reading coordinates. She was speaking to her dog. She was telling the dog, in a calm voice, that she was going to open another tin for him in a little while, and that he was a good boy, and that the water was fine, the water was fine, there was plenty of water, *khoroshiy malchik, vsyo khorosho*.

The signal dissolved.

Belov sat with his hands on the bench in front of him. He did not write the eleven seconds down. He did not write them down for thirty-eight seconds, and then he did, in the same small careful hand he had used since port: *1714. Civilian, marine band. Survivor speaking to an animal.*

He set the pencil across the page. He looked at the bulkhead.

At 1720 the Murmansk weather station broadcast its fifteenth cycle.

The synthesized voice gave the wind from the west-northwest at four meters per second, gusting to six. Visibility ten kilometers. Pressure 1015 hectopascals and steady. No significant weather.

The machine continued, in a calm professional cadence, to describe a morning no one could have stood beneath.

Belov wrote it down because that was what remained of duty.

For the first time since leaving port, he did not ask himself what it meant.

Behind him, in the missile compartment three bulkheads away, Captain Third Rank Mikhail Olegovich Baranov stood in front of an open small steel drawer and looked at his key, with its stupid screwdriver scratch on the bow, and did not yet pick it up.

Part Four: The Key

The drawer had a small chrome lock and a felt insert the color of dried blood. Baranov stood in front of it. The drawer had been open for perhaps four minutes. He had not picked the key up.

The key lay on the felt the way a key lies on felt — not arranged, not displayed, simply put down where it was kept. There were two of them in the same drawer, his and the spare, identical except for the scratch on the bow of his. The scratch was on the left flat. It was about three millimeters long. He had made it with the tip of a Phillips screwdriver in 2019, in a hotel room in Severodvinsk, sitting on the edge of the bed in his uniform trousers and undershirt while his wife slept in the next room. He had been twenty-three minutes from leaving for the dock and he had dropped the key onto the carpet and could not for a moment tell which one it was, and he had felt, for that moment, a

panic so disproportionate to the stakes that he had been ashamed of it and then angry at the shame, and he had taken the screwdriver from his small toolkit and made the scratch, and he had hated himself for it for several years.

He looked at the scratch.

The metal of the key was a dull greenish-gray. The bow had a single small hole in it the size of the tip of a pencil. The teeth were ordinary. It was, he had thought for years and thought again now, exactly the kind of key a man might use to open the drawer of a postbox at the bottom of an apartment block. It was the size of an aspirin tablet held edgewise. It did not weigh more than a coin.

He put two fingers against the felt beside it. He did not pick it up. He stood there and looked at it and thought, with a small distant interest, that the manual prohibited the scratch, and that the scratch had at this moment become the only thing about the key that was his.

Behind him the speaker on the bulkhead clicked twice, the way it did before a transmission, and he heard Belov's voice come through with a formality that made the hair on his forearms rise before he understood why.

"Captain to the radio shack. Captain to the radio shack."

Belov never said anything twice.

Baranov closed the drawer. He did not lock it. He turned and walked forward.

In the radio shack Belov was sitting very straight. The headphones were on both ears. His pencil was in his right hand, point down, on a fresh page. His left hand was flat on the bench beside the printer.

The printer had produced two lines of code and was producing a third.

He did not look at Morozov when the captain came in. He was watching the printer.

A fourth line came out. A fifth. The printer stopped.

Belov tore the sheet off, very carefully, along the perforation. He laid it on the bench. He did not pick it up to read. He read it where it lay, with his hands at his sides.

He read it twice.

Then he turned. He held the sheet between two fingers, the way a man holds a hot wire.

"Captain," he said.

His voice was too formal.

"This one is ours."

Morozov took the sheet. He read it once. He read it twice. He read it a third time. The control room beyond the doorway had gone quiet in a way that was not the quiet of ultra-quiet. It was the quiet of men pretending they were not listening.

"Authentication."

"First group nominal. Second group nominal. Origin prefix matches the strategic command authority. Time group is current. Address is *Verkhoyansk* by pennant. Captain, the message has the —" he paused — "the appendix prefix, sir."

"Read it to me."

Belov read it to him. He read it in his small flat administrative voice. He read every group in the order they had arrived. He did not editorialize. When he reached the appendix prefix he said the letters and the numbers in the order they were printed and did not pause.

The message was forty-one groups long.

The end of the world, Morozov thought, had forty-one groups.

He folded the sheet once, along the existing crease that the printer had made, and he put it in the inside breast pocket of his tunic, against his body.

"Belov."

"Yes, Captain."

"Confirm no countermanding traffic."

"None received, Captain."

"Confirm no traffic of any kind in the last ninety seconds."

Belov turned to his receivers. He worked for perhaps thirty seconds. He came back.

"Strategic band silent. ELF silent. Civilian bands — the Murmansk weather station is broadcasting cycle nineteen. Wind from the northwest at five meters. Visibility ten kilometers. No significant weather."

"Note it."

"Yes, Captain."

"Address the next radio entry to me personally. Nothing through the OOD. Anything at all, Belov. Anything. You bring it to me yourself."

"Yes, Captain."

Morozov left the radio shack. In the passageway outside he stood for perhaps four seconds with his hand against the bulkhead. He did not close his eyes. He looked at a point on the deck plates between his boots. Then he walked forward.

In the control room he did not announce the message. He said, in the same voice he had used all morning: "Pavel Andreyevich. Wardroom. Now. Bring Baranov, Anisimov, Kravtsov, the doctor, and the Podpolkovnik. Belov as well."

Sokolov looked at him.

He saw it.

"Yes, Captain."

They were all in the wardroom in under three minutes. Nobody had been told what had happened. Everybody knew. Anisimov had wiped his hands on a rag on the way forward and the rag was still in his hand, balled. Kravtsov had brought his clipboard. Orlova had nothing in her hands and her hands were folded. Belov stood by the door because there was no chair.

Morozov took the sheet of paper out of his breast pocket. He unfolded it. He laid it on the table flat, with the printed side up, and turned it once with two fingers so that everyone at the table could read it from where they sat.

He did not speak.

For a long moment nobody else spoke either.

Zorin read it first. He read it without picking it up, the way Belov had. When he was finished he sat back in his chair and put his hands palms down on the table.

"Authenticated order," he said. "We proceed."

Morozov did not look at him. He was still standing. He had not sat.

"Pavel Andreyevich. Verify the authentication."

Sokolov leaned forward and read it. He read it twice, the way Belov had, the way Morozov had. He read it a third time. When he was finished he looked up.

"The authentication is valid, sir."

"Captain Third Rank Baranov. Verify the address."

Baranov read it. "Address is *Verkhoyansk* by pennant, Captain. Time group is current within the receipt window. Target package is encoded. The package will resolve to coordinates upon physical insertion of the captain's authentication token at the navigation console. I cannot confirm the targets without that step."

"Don't take that step."

"No, Captain."

"Confirm readiness state."

"The boat's nominal readiness state is unchanged, Captain. Tubes are sealed. Reactor is nominal. The missile control system is in routine standby. To advance to launch readiness will require approximately fourteen minutes from your order. Less if pushed."

"How much less."

"Twelve, Captain."

"Don't push it."

"No, Captain."

Zorin said, very quietly, "Captain. With respect. The order is authenticated. The address is correct. The time group is current. We are required to advance."

"We are required to advance when I order it, Podpolkovnik."

"You are required to order it."

Morozov looked at him for the first time. He looked at him for a count of four. Zorin did not look away. Morozov looked back at the paper.

"Kravtsov."

"Sir."

"What is the sea doing."

Kravtsov set his clipboard on the table. He did not look at it. "Three minutes ago I logged a fourth pressure event at extreme range, Captain. Bearing approximately two-five-zero. I cannot classify it. I can only tell you that it was larger than the third, and the third was larger than the second."

"Could it be retaliation."

"Captain, I cannot tell what it is retaliation *for*. I can only tell you the sea is no longer behaving like a sea."

"Strategic detonations."

"Consistent with. Not confirmed."

"Note it."

"Yes, Captain."

Anisimov spoke without being asked. He said, looking at the rag in his hand: "The boat can launch, Captain."

"And."

"And I would prefer not to make an old woman murder in bad trim. Give me the eight hours I asked for. She can do it now. She will do it better in eight."

"Eight hours is not in the time group, Nikolai Petrovich."

"No, Captain. It is not."

Zorin said, "The chief engineer's preference does not modify an authenticated order."

Anisimov did not look at him. He spoke to the table. "I have not modified anything, Podpolkovnik. I have stated a maintenance opinion. I am required to state maintenance opinions. They are entered in the log."

He looked up. He looked at Morozov.

"My maintenance opinion is in the log, Captain."

"Noted, Nikolai Petrovich."

"Thank you, Captain."

Orlova spoke next. She had been waiting. She spoke in the same flat clinical voice she had used in the previous wardroom.

"The crew knows, Captain."

"How."

"They always know. They have known since approximately eleven minutes ago. I have observed three men in the forward berthing who are showing acute symptoms. One sailor is in a head being silently sick. A cook is standing at his station with his hands in cold water and has not moved them in seven minutes. Two men are praying. One is laughing." She paused. "The young seaman from the forward auxiliary watch — the boy from the pier — has opened his locker twice and closed it twice without removing anything. He has the paper bag in his hand."

She looked at Morozov.

"Captain. The crew will obey an order. They will obey almost any order. They will not, in my professional opinion, remain functional after obeying this one. They will remain *alive,* sir. I am not certain they will remain functional. I want that on the record."

"It is on the record, Doctor."

"Thank you, Captain."

Sokolov spoke. He had been looking at the paper since he had finished reading it. He had not lifted his eyes.

"Captain."

"Yes, Pavel Andreyevich."

"The order is valid."

"Yes."

"The authentication is correct, the address is correct, the time group is current."

"Yes."

"That does not tell us whether the world that issued it still exists."

He lifted his eyes.

"Sir, I have been thinking about my question from yesterday. I have been thinking about it for fourteen hours. I have not been able to put it down. If the chain that authenticated this order has not survived the events that produced it — if the men who pressed the keys to send this are themselves no longer alive — then we are not executing the will of a state, Captain. We are executing the last reflex of a corpse. And procedure does not tell us how to obey a corpse."

Zorin's face was very still.

"Captain Second Rank Sokolov. You are interpreting an authenticated order."

"Yes, Podpolkovnik. I am."

"That is treason."

"With respect, Podpolkovnik. We are at three hundred meters depth in a missile boat receiving a forty-one-group launch order from a transmitter we cannot verify is staffed by a living human being. If the word *treason* still has its peacetime meaning at this moment, I will accept that judgment when we surface and someone is left to deliver it."

Zorin did not raise his voice. He almost never raised his voice. He spoke to Morozov as though Sokolov were not in the room.

"Captain. Your first officer has just declared his intention to interpret rather than execute. I require, formally, that you note this."

Morozov said, "It is noted."

"Captain. With respect. I require, formally, that you advance the missile compartment to launch readiness."

"Noted, Podpolkovnik."

"Captain —"

"I have noted it."

Zorin sat back. The chair was bolted to the deck. He could not move it.

There was a long quiet in the wardroom.

Morozov let it go on. He let it go on for what Sokolov, who began counting it after the first second, made forty-three seconds. Then Morozov lifted the sheet of paper from the table and folded it once, and put it back inside his tunic.

"Pavel Andreyevich."

"Yes, Captain."

"Bring the keys."

Sokolov did not move at once.

"Sir."

"Bring all three keys to this table. Mine. Yours. The missile officer's. I want them on this table inside five minutes."

"Yes, Captain."

"Captain Third Rank Baranov, Captain Second Rank Sokolov will accompany you for the missile officer's key. I want both of you in the same compartment for that step. I want it witnessed. I want it logged."

"Yes, Captain."

"Belov."

"Yes, Captain."

"Pipe through the boat. Compartment-by-compartment muster. I want every man present at his station, with his rate and his name confirmed verbally to his department head, and I want department heads reporting to the control room within ten minutes. Every man, Belov. Including yours."

"Yes, Captain."

"Anisimov."

"Captain."

"Reactor and trim status reported to me directly inside ten minutes. Through the speaker. Not through the OOD. Your voice."

"Yes, Captain."

"Doctor."

"Yes."

"Walk the boat. Front to back. Look at every compartment. I want your assessment of the men by name. Not in numbers. I want the names of the men you are concerned about. I want it inside fifteen minutes."

"Yes, Captain."

"Kravtsov."

"Yes, Captain."

"Continue listening. If the sea does anything else, I want to know within thirty seconds."

"Yes, Captain."

"Podpolkovnik Zorin."

"Yes, Captain."

"You will remain in this compartment with me until the keys are on this table."

"Captain. I should be present at the missile compartment readiness check."

"You will remain in this compartment, Podpolkovnik. With me. Until the keys are on this table."

Zorin's jaw moved once. He did not speak.

"Move," Morozov said.

They moved.

Sokolov and Baranov went aft together. They did not speak in the passageway. At the missile compartment Baranov opened the small steel drawer for the second time that day. The two keys were where they had been. Sokolov stood in the doorway with his hands at his sides and watched. Baranov picked up his own key for the first time.

He picked it up between thumb and forefinger. He held it in his palm for a moment, weighing it. The metal of the key was the temperature of the felt. It warmed in his hand at once. The scratch on the bow caught the red light and was, for a second, the brightest thing in the drawer.

He closed his hand around it.

"Mikhail Olegovich," Sokolov said, from the door.

"Yes, sir."

"Bring it to the wardroom."

"Yes, sir."

He brought it.

Sokolov went to the captain's cabin with one of the small armed escorts they used for this — a starshina who had been doing the role for nine years and had never had to do it for real, and whose face during the procedure was the color of cigarette ash — and took Morozov's key from the safe. Then he took his own from his own safe. He held both keys in his left hand on the way back to the wardroom, and he did not let his hand close on them, because if his hand closed on them he was going to crush something inside himself that he was not yet certain he wanted to crush.

Through the speakers, around the boat, Belov's voice went compartment to compartment.

"All compartments, muster. All compartments, muster."

In the forward berthing the torpedoman who had been lying like a saint on a tomb stood up and put his cap on with hands that were shaking only at the fingertips. The cook in the galley took his hands out of the cold water and dried them on his apron and reported. The young seaman from the auxiliary watch — the boy from the pier — was, when his department head got to him, sitting on the deck plates outside his locker with the paper bag in his lap. He stood up. He did not let go of the bag. He gave his rate and his name. The department head wrote it down. The boy was crying without making a sound and did not appear to know it.

In engineering Anisimov stood beside the reactor panel with Pyotr at his elbow and reported to Morozov through the speaker in the same dry voice he reported maintenance.

"Captain. Reactor nominal. Trim nominal within the parameters of an old woman who has been at depth too long. Pressure stable. Steam loop steady. The boat is ready for whatever order the captain gives her, Captain. The boat has no opinion."

"Thank you, Nikolai Petrovich."

"Captain."

"Yes."

"For the record. The boat may have no opinion. I do."

"Note it for the log."

"It is noted, Captain."

"Thank you."

In the forward sonar shack Kravtsov had both hands on his headphones and his eyes closed. He was not listening for an enemy. He was listening for the world.

In the wardroom Morozov sat at the head of the table for the first time in the meeting. He had been standing all morning. Zorin sat to his right where he had been. Orlova came in from her walk at the eleventh minute and took her place against the bulkhead and folded her hands again and did not yet speak. Belov stood by the door with his book.

At minute twelve Sokolov returned with Morozov's key and his own. He set them on the table, on the printed side of the paper that Morozov had laid back down. He set them carefully. They made a small bright sound on the paper.

At minute thirteen Baranov returned with his key. He set it next to the others. There were now three keys on the launch order.

Baranov sat down. He looked at the keys. His hand was on the table beside them.

He extended one finger.

He touched the bow of his own key. He did not pick it up. He touched it the way a man touches a sleeping child's forehead — to know it is there, to know it is warm, to know it is his. He felt the small ridge of the scratch under his fingertip. He left his finger on it for perhaps two seconds.

Then he took his hand away and put it in his lap.

Zorin watched this. Zorin watched everything. He waited for Morozov to speak. When Morozov did not, Zorin spoke himself, in the calm bureaucratic voice that was the only voice he had.

"Captain. The keys are present. The order is authenticated. The crew is mustered. The boat is ready. We are at the point in the procedure at which the captain's authentication token is inserted at the navigation console and the target package is resolved. I am required to remind you, formally and for the log, that any further delay constitutes failure to execute an authenticated order from the strategic command authority of the Russian Federation. Failure to execute that order is treason. Treason in time of war is a capital offense. I require, formally, that you proceed."

He paused.

"Captain. Any officer aboard this vessel who supports your refusal to proceed is, by the same standard, guilty of the same offense. This includes the first officer. This includes the missile officer. This includes the chief engineer." He glanced, without moving his head, at Orlova. "This may include the medical officer, depending on her actions."

He looked back at Morozov.

"I will make my own report, Captain. When we surface."

Morozov sat with his hands folded on the table in front of the keys and the paper.

He looked at the keys.

He looked at the men around the table — at Sokolov on his left, who had not yet sat, and at Baranov opposite, whose hand was in his lap, and at Anisimov's empty chair where the rag still lay balled on the seat, and at Orlova against the bulkhead, and at Belov in the doorway with his book.

He did not look at Zorin.

"Pavel Andreyevich."

"Yes, Captain."

"Sit down."

Sokolov sat.

Morozov put the tips of his fingers, very lightly, on the folded edge of the launch order, beside the three small keys.

He did not pick it up.

He did not pick up his key.

Above them, six hundred kilometers to the south, the synthesized voice of the Murmansk maritime weather station began its twentieth cycle. It reported wind from the northwest at five meters per second, gusting to seven. It reported visibility ten kilometers. It reported pressure 1015 hectopascals and steady. It reported, in its calm professional cadence, no significant weather.

The boat held her depth.

The boat held her course.

Three keys lay on a forty-one-group order on a table in a small steel room three hundred meters under the surface of an ocean that was no longer behaving like an ocean, and the men who could turn them sat around the table and looked at them, and did not yet move.

Part Five: Прекрасное далеко

The keys lay on the paper.

The paper was forty-one groups long. It had a single horizontal crease where Morozov had folded it once at the radio shack and once again here, against the felt of the table. The crease had a small printed letter caught inside it that the fold had cut in half. Nobody had moved the paper after Morozov had laid it flat.

The keys lay on the paper the way coins lie on a counter at the end of a transaction nobody wants to admit has finished. They were three. They were small. They were not arranged. The scratch on the bow of Baranov's key caught the red light along its three-millimeter length and made a thin pale line

that did not belong on a regulation key and was, at this moment, the only thing in the wardroom that was clearly the work of a particular human hand.

Nobody spoke.

The boat held her depth. Somewhere aft a fitting cooled and made the small percussive tick that nobody in the wardroom remarked on because they had been listening to it for fifteen hours. The ventilation ran. The red lighting did not change. Zorin, on Morozov's right, sat with his palms flat on the table and his eyes on the keys. Sokolov, on Morozov's left, sat with his hands folded in his lap. Baranov sat opposite Morozov with his chair pushed back perhaps four centimeters from the table, as though he had moved away from the keys without quite knowing he had done it. Orlova stood against the bulkhead. Belov stood in the doorway with his book.

The room breathed.

Baranov was looking at his key.

He was looking at the scratch on the bow.

He was, without intending to, listening to a sound he had not heard in thirty-one years.

He had been seven. He had been wearing the wool school uniform with the white collar that his mother had starched too stiff that morning and that had cut a small red line into the soft skin under his jaw, which he had been worrying with one finger throughout the rehearsal and which was now, in the school hall, hot under the lights. There were forty-one of them on the risers. The teacher's name had been Galina Sergeyevna. She had conducted with two fingers. She had had a small mole on her cheek that moved when she smiled. She had loved the song.

The song had asked the future to be kind.

The song had asked the future not to forget where it had come from.

The song had spoken to the future as to a person, by name, and asked the future to look back at the children who were singing and to be merciful. He had not understood that, then. He had stood on the risers in his stiff collar and sung the words because Galina Sergeyevna had taught them to him, and he had felt, dimly, that the song was about a beautiful distant something — a *prekrasnoe daleko* — that was waiting for him personally, and that all he had to do was grow up correctly, and the song would have been kept.

He had not known then, he thought now, that a song could ask something of a man thirty years later.

He had not known that a song could be present in a small steel room three hundred meters under the sea.

He had not known that the future, when it arrived, would be a key the size of an aspirin tablet, with a screwdriver scratch on the bow.

He took his hand off the arm of the chair. He put it on his thigh instead. He did not pick up the key.

Morozov spoke.

"Belov."

Belov, in the doorway, came one step further into the room.

"Yes, Captain."

"Has any human voice from the strategic command authority spoken to this vessel since the order arrived."

"No, Captain."

"Has any countermand been received."

"No, Captain."

"Has any traffic at all been received from the chain of command above us."

"None, Captain. The strategic band has been silent for eighteen minutes."

"Civilian traffic?"

"The Murmansk weather station has completed cycle twenty-one, Captain. Wind from the northwest at six. Visibility ten kilometers. Pressure dropping by one. There is, the station reports, no significant weather."

"Note it."

"Yes, Captain."

"Kravtsov."

Kravtsov was not in the room. He was at his station. His voice came through the wardroom speaker because Morozov had ordered the line kept open.

"Yes, Captain."

"What does the sea indicate."

"In the last forty minutes I have logged six pressure events at extreme range, Captain. Two were larger than anything I logged earlier today. The bearings are dispersed. Several northern Atlantic, two Pacific, one I cannot triangulate. I cannot classify them by ordinance. I can only tell you that whatever has been happening above the surface has been happening to multiple oceans simultaneously."

"Strategic detonations."

"Captain, I will not say that word into a log I do not control. But yes. Yes, Captain. In my professional judgment. Yes."

"Note it."

"Yes, Captain."

"Anisimov."

The chief engineer was also not in the room. His voice came through the same speaker.

"Captain."

"Can the boat launch."

"Captain, the boat can launch. I have stated this before. I will state it again. The reactor is nominal. The trim is acceptable. The tubes are sealed and capable. If you order the missile compartment to launch readiness, Captain Third Rank Baranov will tell you the system can be brought to launch state in approximately twelve minutes. The boat is, mechanically, capable."

"And otherwise."

"Otherwise, Captain, the boat is forty-seven years old and has been to sea more times than most of the men aboard her. The boat is tired. The boat does not, in my professional opinion, want to do this thing. The boat will do whatever the captain orders. The boat is a machine. But I am required to state, for the log, that the chief engineer aboard her would prefer not to be the man who orders her to do it."

"Noted, Nikolai Petrovich."

"Captain."

"Doctor."

Orlova, against the bulkhead, lifted her head.

"Yes, Captain."

"Is the crew functional."

"In what sense, Captain."

"Will they obey an order to advance the boat to launch readiness."

She thought before she answered. She thought for perhaps four seconds.

"Yes, Captain. They will obey. The crew is Russian and the crew is disciplined and the men aboard this boat have been trained for fifteen and twenty and thirty years to obey an order of this kind. They will obey."

"And."

"And, Captain. I have walked the boat. I have the names you asked for. I have eleven names, Captain. Eleven men I will not, in my medical capacity, certify as functional after this order. I will give you those names if you require them. Of the eleven, three are men I am concerned about for the duration of any return voyage we may make. Two I would commit to a hospital if there were a hospital to commit them to. One —" she paused, "— one is the boy from the pier, Captain. He is at his station. He is performing his duties. He is, in my judgment, no longer capable of holding a thought longer than perhaps thirty seconds. He will obey an order. He will not, after the order, be the same man who obeyed it."

"Eleven names."

"Yes, Captain."

"Note them."

"Yes, Captain. They are noted."

"Captain Third Rank Baranov."

Baranov looked up. His finger had been on the scratch again. He had not been aware of it.

"Yes, Captain."

"Is the missile system ready."

"The system is ready, Captain. Twelve minutes from your order to launch capability. The keys are present."

"Captain Second Rank Sokolov."

"Yes, Captain."

"Is the order valid."

"The order is authenticated, Captain. The address is correct. The time group is current. By every measure available to us aboard this vessel, the order is valid."

"Podpolkovnik Zorin."

"Yes, Captain."

"Does command require execution."

"The order requires execution, Captain. The chain of command has spoken. A submarine at sea is not a parliament."

Morozov sat with his hands folded on the table.

"No," he said. "But it is still made of men."

Zorin's face did not change.

"Captain. With respect. I have heard, in the last two minutes, your communications officer state that no living human voice has spoken to this vessel. I have heard your sonar officer decline to use the word *nuclear* in a log he does not control. I have heard your chief engineer state that an old machine has feelings. I have heard your medical officer give names instead of numbers. I have heard your missile officer say that a key is *present* rather than *ready*. And I have heard your first officer say that the order is *valid* and stop there."

He paused. His voice had not risen.

"Captain. You have built a structure inside which a refusal is going to occur. I am required to state, formally, that I see what you have built. I am required to state, formally, that any officer in this room who participates in that refusal will be named, by me, in a report I will deliver upon our return. I will name Captain Second Rank Sokolov. I will name Captain Third Rank Baranov. I will name Captain Second Rank Anisimov. I will name Lieutenant Kravtsov. I will name Doctor Orlova.

I will name Starshina Belov. I will name them by rank and by patronymic and by the names of their wives and their children, Captain, because that is how the report will be written."

He paused again.

"Captain. The order is authenticated. Delay is refusal. Refusal is treason. Treason in time of war is a capital offense. I require, formally and for the final time, that you proceed."

There was a silence.

It was not a long silence by the clock. It was perhaps four seconds. It was, by the measure of the men in the room, longer than that.

Then Belov, in the doorway, made a small sound. He did not mean to. He had been holding the headphones in his left hand because he had brought them with him from the radio shack, and they were live, and he had heard, in the last second, something inside them that had made him take a sharp breath through his nose.

Morozov looked at him.

"Belov."

"Captain."

"What."

"I — Captain, a moment. I have to —"

He turned. He went back to the radio shack. He was gone for perhaps eleven seconds. He came back at a pace just short of a run, with the headphones still in one hand and an expression on his face that none of the men in the wardroom had ever seen on it before.

"Captain. A fragment. Three seconds, perhaps four. Civilian band. I cannot give you a station. The signal was too weak."

"What did you hear."

Belov did not answer at once.

"Music," he said.

"What music."

He looked at Baranov when he answered. He did not mean to. His eyes simply went there.

"Children, Captain. Children's voices."

"Singing what."

"The school song, Captain."

He did not say the title. He did not need to.

Baranov closed his eyes.

Orlova, against the bulkhead, made a small movement with her hand toward her mouth and stopped it before it finished. Sokolov, beside Morozov, looked at his own hands and did not look up. Anisimov's voice, through the speaker, was silent. Kravtsov's voice was silent. The boat held her depth.

The fragment was already gone. Belov could not have brought it back if his life had depended on it. It had been three seconds, perhaps four — a thread of children's voices, thin as wire, drifting on a frequency that should have been carrying a state youth program and was, possibly, still carrying one, on backup, from a transmitter that had survived something the children had not.

He could not say whether they were alive.

He could not say whether the recording was old.

He could not say whether any child in any school hall in the Russian Federation was, at this moment, singing this song to a teacher conducting with two fingers.

He could not say.

He stood in the doorway of the wardroom with the headphones in his hand and he could not say.

Then the sea took it back.

Morozov let it lie there for perhaps ten seconds.

Then he spoke.

He spoke quietly. He did not address Zorin. He addressed Sokolov.

"Pavel Andreyevich."

"Yes, Captain."

"Will you turn your key."

Sokolov looked at his hands. He looked at them for a long moment. When he looked up he looked at Morozov, not at Zorin.

"The order is authenticated, Captain. I have stated this. I will state it in any tribunal that asks me. The order is authenticated. Captain — I will not turn my key."

"Captain Third Rank Baranov."

Baranov opened his eyes.

"Yes, Captain."

"Will you turn your key."

Baranov looked at the key on the table. He looked at the scratch on the bow.

"The system is ready, Captain. The key is present. Captain — the key will remain out of the lock."

"Captain Second Rank Anisimov."

The voice through the speaker was steady. There was a small pause before he answered, and in the pause one could hear, faintly, the hum of the reactor coolant pumps in the background — Vera, breathing, in her own compartment three bulkheads aft.

"Captain. The boat can launch. I will not bring her to a launch trim except on a lawful order issued by a living chain of command. I am noting this in the engineering log with my name. Captain."

"Noted."

"Captain."

"Lieutenant Kravtsov."

"Yes, Captain."

"What does the sea indicate."

"Captain, the sea indicates that whoever started this is no longer in a position to finish it. Another launch from this vessel will not answer the war that has happened. It will only add to it. I am stating this in the sonar log with my name."

"Noted."

"Captain."

"Doctor."

"Yes, Captain."

"What is your judgment."

"My judgment, Captain, is that the crew will obey an order to launch. My judgment is also that the crew should not be ordered to launch. I have given you the eleven names. I will give them to any tribunal that asks. Captain — I will not certify any man aboard this boat as fit to participate in a strategic launch under present conditions. I am stating this in the medical log with my name."

"Noted."

"Captain."

"Belov."

"Yes, Captain."

"For the record. Has any countermand been received."

"No, Captain."

"Has any living confirmation been received."

"No, Captain."

"Note both."

"Yes, Captain."

There was a silence again.

Zorin had been watching the keys. He looked up now and he looked, slowly, from face to face — at Sokolov, at Baranov, at Orlova, at Belov, at the speaker through which Anisimov and Kravtsov had spoken — and he understood, perhaps before Morozov did, that the room had already left him.

He did not say anything for a moment.

Then he said, very calmly: "Captain. I am invoking emergency authority under strategic command directive to relieve you of command. Captain Second Rank Sokolov, you are ordered to take command of this vessel and execute the authenticated order. Captain Third Rank Baranov, you are ordered to assist him."

Nobody moved.

"Captain Second Rank Sokolov."

Sokolov did not look at him.

"Captain Third Rank Baranov."

Baranov did not look at him.

"Doctor Orlova. As medical officer, you are required to certify the captain unfit and confirm the transfer of command."

Orlova looked at him. She looked at him for perhaps three seconds. Then she looked back at Morozov, and she did not speak, because there was no answer she needed to give that her silence did not give better.

Zorin looked from face to face one more time. He understood the second time more completely than the first. His hands, on the table, did not move. There was, very briefly, something in his face that was not procedural and was not bureaucratic and was, perhaps, the closest thing to grief that Zorin's face had been built to allow. It passed.

"I will note this," he said.

"Note it," Morozov said. "Belov will help you with the wording, when there is time."

Morozov stood.

"Log this," he said, to Belov. "Authenticated launch order received at 1701. Authentication confirmed. Address confirmed. Time group confirmed. No countermand received. No living command confirmation received. Distant pressure events consistent with strategic detonations logged at multiple bearings. Eleven crew members noted by the medical officer as not fit for participation. Execution withheld by command decision of Captain First Rank S. V. Morozov, commanding officer, K-52 *Verkhoyansk,* this date, this hour, with the concurrence in their professional capacities of the first officer, the missile officer, the chief engineer, the sonar officer, the medical officer, and the communications officer, each signing under his or her own name. Note the formal protest of Podpolkovnik D. A. Zorin. Note that the keys were present on the table at the time of the decision. Note that the keys did not turn."

"Yes, Captain."

"Captain Third Rank Baranov."

"Yes, Captain."

"Take your key. Secure it in its drawer. The captain's key will return to my safe. The first officer's key will return to his. We will not destroy them. That would be theater, and we are not in the theater business."

"Yes, Captain."

Baranov stood. He looked at his key on the table for one more moment. Then he picked it up. He picked it up the way a man picks up a thing he has decided to carry — between the thumb and forefinger, without flourish, without reverence, the way he had picked it up forty minutes earlier in the missile compartment with Sokolov in the doorway. He felt the scratch under his thumb. He felt the small warmth where his own hand had rested earlier. He closed his fingers over it.

He took Morozov's key from the table. He took Sokolov's. He held them all in one closed hand.

He did not put them in his pocket. A pocket would have been wrong.

He carried them in his hand, openly, to the missile compartment and to the captain's cabin and to the first officer's cabin, and he locked them away behind the small chrome locks where they had been kept that morning, and he did not pretend the locks were enough.

He walked back to the wardroom. He sat down. He put his hand flat on the table where his key had been. The felt of the table had a small bright shape in it where the key had lain. The shape would fade in an hour. It had not faded yet.

Kravtsov's voice came through the speaker.

"Captain."

"Yes."

"Pressure event. Bearing two-seven-five. Larger than any I have logged today."

"Time."

"Now, Captain. As we were speaking."

"Note it."

"Yes, Captain. Captain — I am logging another. Bearing zero-nine-zero. And — wait. Wait, Captain. Three more. Distributed. I cannot keep up with them at this rate."

"Keep listening, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Captain."

Belov's voice from the doorway.

"Captain."

"Yes."

"The Murmansk weather station has stopped broadcasting."

"When."

"Cycle twenty-two did not arrive, Captain. It is two minutes overdue."

Morozov stood at the head of the table for a long moment.

"Note it."

"Yes, Captain."

He turned to Sokolov.

"Pavel Andreyevich."

"Yes, Captain."

"Course."

Sokolov looked at the chart that lay folded on the sideboard beside the cold tea. He did not open it. He did not need to.

"Course, Captain?"

Morozov walked to the sideboard. He unfolded the chart. The coast was still printed on it. The coastline ran from Murmansk down past Severodvinsk and across to Arkhangelsk in the same pale gray it had been printed in for forty years. A draftsman in a navigation office had drawn that line in 1986 from a survey conducted in 1981, and it had been on every chart of these waters since, and it was on this chart, now, in red light, in the wardroom of a submarine three hundred meters under a sea that had stopped behaving like a sea.

He looked at it.

He did not know whether the coast was still there.

Nobody aboard knew whether the coast was still there.

The chart did not know.

He put his finger on the line.

"Course one-eight-zero," he said.

Sokolov repeated it. The order went through the speaker to the helm, and the helm acknowledged, in a voice Morozov did not recognize and would not have recognized on a different day, and the boat began, slowly, to turn.

The deck tilted.

Vera came around.

She came around the way she had always come around, with the small reluctant motion of a heavy thing that has been pointed at something for a long time and is now being pointed somewhere else,

and the men in the wardroom felt it through their boots, and the men in the engineering spaces felt it through Anisimov's hand on the bulkhead, and the men in the missile compartment felt it through the deck plates, and nobody cheered, and nobody called it mercy, and nobody called it mutiny.

Morozov sat down.

He sat down at the head of the table where the keys had been. The shape of the keys was still in the felt. He put his hands on the table in front of where they had been. He looked at the place. He looked at it for a long time.

Then he lowered his head.

He sang, in a voice so small it was almost only breath, the first words of a song every child in Russia had once known.

Прекрасное далеко.

He did not sing the whole phrase. He sang two words. He sang them to nobody — to himself, perhaps, or to Galina Sergeyevna who had taught Baranov those two words thirty-one years ago and might or might not be alive, or to Anisimov's sister in Murmansk whom he had never met, or to Tatyana on the marine band who had spoken to her dog in a calm voice and used the words *vsyo khorosho*.

Baranov closed his eyes. He breathed the next phrase with him. He did not sing it. He breathed it. The collar of his shirt had not been starched too stiff this morning. There was no red line under his jaw. He was forty years old and he was sitting in a wardroom three hundred meters under the sea and he was breathing a song he had sung in a school hall when he had not known what it asked of him.

Belov, in the doorway, with the headphones still in his hand, joined on the third word.

Orlova's lips moved once and stopped.

Sokolov did not sing. His hand, on the table, closed around nothing where his key had been, and opened again.

Anisimov did not sing. He was three bulkheads aft with his palm on the steam line and did not know any of this was happening, except that perhaps he did, because he chose this exact moment to speak to the boat, very quietly, in the diminutive he had used for her since 2007, and to say *tikho, staraya, my idyom domoy* — quiet, old woman, we are going home — though there was no longer any way to know whether home was there.

Kravtsov did not sing. He was logging pressure events. He logged seven of them in the time it took the song to happen.

Zorin did not sing. He sat at the table with his hands flat on it and he heard them. He looked from face to face and he understood, again, more completely, that the room had left him. He did not interrupt. Interrupting would have required authority he no longer possessed.

The song lasted perhaps five seconds.

Five seconds of unnecessary sound in a boat whose life depended on silence.

It was, Morozov thought afterward, the greatest risk he had taken all day. Larger than the refusal. Larger than the keys. Sonar would not have heard it. No instrument aboard would have heard it. But it was a sound the men aboard had made together that they were not required to make, and that was all he had asked it to be.

Then it was gone.

The boat steadied on her new course.

Belov went back to his shack. He sat down. He took the headphones in both hands and put them on. He tuned to the Murmansk maritime weather station frequency. He listened to it for a long time. The frequency was clean. There was no carrier. There was no automated voice. There was, on the frequency that for forty years had broadcast a synthesized woman's voice describing the weather over Murmansk every six minutes without interruption, only the slow electromagnetic murmur of the planet's own machinery.

He logged it.

1809. Murmansk maritime weather station — silent.

He underlined it once. He did not underline it twice.

He set the pencil across the page and he sat, in the red light, in the radio shack of the *Verkhoyansk,* and listened to the sea.

In the wardroom, after the song had ended, Morozov sat with his hands on the table and did not move for a long time.

The shape of the keys was still in the felt.

It would fade in an hour. It would fade.

The boat went on, slow and small, on a course of one-eight-zero, toward a coastline that had been printed on a chart in 1986 and that might or might not still exist.

Vera carried, in her sealed tubes, all her unopened fire.

The key did not turn.

End.