

The Coldest War

Prologue

Troieshchyna, Ukraine

October 17

19:32 Local Time

The streetlights in Troieshchyna flickered weakly, their fractured halos bleeding through smoke and dust and brick powder that danced in the headlights that Taras chanced to use for a few seconds. Ukraine's infamous winter had yet to take root but already the night wind was lashing against the rubble, stirring up a layer of soot before the hatchback. Taras killed the lights because they were useless and he very much wanted to live for at least another few hours.

Slowing down, the Lada's engine growled and sputtered as he rode the clutch. Inside the cramped cabin, his neck gaiter rode high over his nose to kill the acrid stench of death and diesel and cement. Taras considered the gaiter an indispensable garment, acting as both air filter and disguise. The drones in this block had gotten smaller and less predictable, and the invaders had perfected their airborne facial recognition programs to target high-value individuals, or so Laras had been told. If not that, the Russians could certainly identify a suspect vehicle and ruin it with the push of a button. Laras had only just acquired the car, and so he doubted the Russians already had a bead on him, but a lingering eye in the sky could mean a sniper's bullet, a mortar strike, a missile straight up the tailpipe, or God only knew what else. The invaders had an inexhaustible supply of methods to rain death from above and it had begun to feel a lot like the inevitability and randomness of weather.

Relax, he told himself as he downshifted.

It was unlikely the Russians were still targeting this neighborhood, he thought, breathing a little easier through the wool. They'd smashed it to bits months ago, leaving a churned pile of

rubble mixed with the bodies of men and women and children and dogs. The international press people never reported the dogs but the ones still alive were everywhere, thin and feral, occasionally drawing a sniper round because the invaders were either bored or wanted practice. Still, Taras reminded himself, while the bastards had already reduced this neighborhood to rubble, that meant anything that moved was a likely target, easy to spot. But Goddamnit, there wasn't a whole lot he could do about that because he had to get back to the team quickly.

A jagged crater yawned across the road ahead, rebar jutting like ribs in a carcass, and Taras shifted to neutral. He pulled the parking brake and killed the engine. Even with the gaiter filter, he still coughed. The hacks had been getting worse and he wondered if there was something that had infected his lungs. He wouldn't put it past the Russians to have loosed some toxin that might do it. Whatever it was, Taras flung his bent elbow across his mouth to muffle it so he could convulse as if being electrocuted.

Once he had himself under control, he slid out of the car and kicked aside chunks of asphalt, his overcoat hiding the slant at his belt, weighed down by the heavy Russian Makarov he'd stripped from a dead Russian officer whose idling tank Taras had lit up with an American Javelin on the early days of the invasion. Now, thinking again of the micro-drones that might or might not be darting above like summer gnats, he heeded the order he laid down to his own people: *Never, ever show your face.*

With his overcoat buttoned tight and the gaiter to his eyes, he knocked enough debris away so that his Lada hatchback could slither through this city that had seemingly been pronounced dead—the very reason Taras had moved the team here, because even to Russians there was no point in shooting the dead. It just wasted a bullet.

He got back in and drove by memory, guided by the sodium glow of the few remaining lights in windows and the orange flare of oil-barrel fires meant to blind infrared sensors. Rumors whispered of FSB men—the modern half of the old KGB that handled so-called internal security—asking questions in the ruins. Taras was constantly worried the FSB agents were

zeroing in on his hide because they were masters at blending in with the refugees and asking around, posing as Western aid workers. Maybe a drone was watching now, waiting for the signal. *Only one kilometer left.*

At Peremohy Avenue, he ditched the car and slipped into the shadows, a spare magazine bouncing in his coat pocket. His destination loomed ahead: 14A Vatutina Street. Once an upscale apartment building, it was now a ruin the locals called *Zlamany Zub*—The Broken Tooth. Its upper floors gaped open to the night, but the lower levels were still intact and repurposed into the base for Taras's team. There was something poetic, he thought, about putting his team under that broken building, and he imagined it as the forked snake tongue that still flicked from behind the rocks, preparing to counterstrike.

Taras slung a nylon pack over his shoulders and pulled his hood tight, strings cinched against the wind. Head down, gaiter over his nose, his eyes burned, and he fought off the tickle in his lungs while threading a path that took him along the charred husk of a trolleybus, its blown-out windows like empty eye sockets. Across the street, a mural of the Ukrainian trident bled blue and gold over a cologne ad, blackened at the bottom by some car fire that had happened three or four years ago. Whoever paid for that cologne ad got their money's worth, the team would joke, because it had been up there so long and because this place smelled like absolute shit.

Taras slipped through a gap in chain-link fencing, turned sideways to squeeze past a leaning wall, and descended a rusted stairwell into the Broken Tooth's basement. The room had once been the apartment building's security post, its cameras long since shattered, its monitors dead. But the concrete walls still held, and a diesel generator upstairs still coughed power through the cables. In the ruins of Troieshchyna, that was all he needed, transforming the hellhole into what it was now—the nerve center for *Zorya Null*, his cell of war hackers.

They'd been gamers once, students at Kyiv Polytechnic, trading mods and hack files for laughs, often hijacking major commercial titles like Call of Duty and perversely inserting their

own characters or weapons, cracking themselves up. Bizarrely, they reflected now and then, doing that had been good training, both for the invasion and the digital war. When the invaders came, they'd already known a lot about Russian guns like Kalashnikovs and Dragunovs and Makarovs because they'd fooled around with the game. These days, the game had become reality and instead of meeting online they met here, in person, on schedules dictated by the targets they chose to burn.

Taras paused, feeling his way in the dark. The LED strip on the far wall had died, leaving only the weak glow of the low-wattage bulbs powering the servers. Upstairs, the generator hammered like a drum roll, its vibration thrumming through the concrete floor. Power cables sprawled in tangled clumps, then climbed toward the cracked ceiling like vines reaching for daylight. Sick of breathing through wool fibers and desperate to ease his lungs, Taras lowered the gaiter. He knew his way by memory now and the Russian drones, as good as they were, couldn't see through shattered concrete.

After another five meters down, he lifted the tarp over the doorway and stepped through. Though they lived like moles, there was light here. The computers took priority for the generator power, but the team still needed a little light. Taras saw Maksym hunched over a dented pot balanced on a Sterno flame, stirring the beans with a screwdriver, the handle blackened from heat and the smell making his stomach roar even though he was too nervous to eat. "Taras," Maksym said, looking up. "How did it go?"

Taras unbuttoned his coat and placed the holstered Makarov on a box, relieved to be free of the weight. The beans hissed softly, their bubbling mixing with the staccato clack of keys. Beyond Maksym, two men and a woman half-turned from their laptops, faces bilious in the glow of screens, waiting for their leader to speak. Taras unslung the nylon pack and lowered his hood with a slow smile sprouting between his unkempt whiskers. "We have it."

A ripple of approval moved through the room—grins flashing in the dim light.

Kateryna leaned forward, her face pale and pure and still a pleasure to behold, Taras thought. “So,” she asked, “What was he like?” Her specialty was breaking physical security—cameras, sensors, cipher locks—and she always took the most human interest in *Zorya Null*’s targets. That human interest spilled over to the man Taras had expected to meet, a spy from Germany’s *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND, the equivalent of the American CIA.

He wriggled out of his coat. “Never saw him. But the item was waiting where he said—under the mailboxes.” Taras ripped open the backpack’s Velcro flap and pulled out a magnetic key box. Two thumbs slid it apart with a dry click, revealing a black memory card nestled in a fabric sheath.

Oleh leaned back, cracking his knuckles. “Any documentation on the code? Do we even know this is the final version?” Two of Oleh’s brothers had died on the northern front and he was the only one who never joked.

“No, Oleh, no release notes,” Taras said, passing the item to Maksym. “Should we call customer service?”

Oleh turned away.

“On the phone he said it was the golden sample,” Taras added over his shoulder. “Best they can do for now.”

“Let me see it. Might be an FSB trap.”

Taras handed the card over and Oleh ran it through a diagnostic program they’d created that looked for telltale fingerprints of the FSB.

“Anything?”

“No.”

Taras shrugged. “Then let’s use it. Now.”

“Now?”

“The sooner we use it, the less risk someone will know about it.” Taras checked his watch. “Kat, shift change in fifteen minutes, right?”

She glanced at a window on her screen. “Yes. Up in the tundra, our friend Andrei’s already typing notes for the passdown.” She pivoted her laptop so the others could see the live video, streaming in from thousands of miles away. They knew their subjects well by mining social media. “Here comes Andrei’s relief—poor, miserable Yuri, in from the cold.”

On the monitor, two Russian engineers at an industrial site moved inside a brightly lit control room. One peeled off layers of heavy clothing, stomping his feet against the tile, snow falling in clumps from his boots. The other stretched, rubbing his eyes. Their mouths moved, but to the Ukrainians it was like watching TV with the sound on mute.

For weeks, Taras and his partisans relied on gestures and keystrokes to fill the audio gaps in their surveillance—clipboard checks, gauge tours, log-ins, and authentications. Now, Yuri looped his coat over a wall hook and turned away from the screens.

Back under the Broken Tooth, Maksym slid the memory card into his laptop and ran the payload through a code-checking sandbox. The glow of the screen painted his face gray.

“Well?” Taras asked.

Maksym gave a one-shoulder shrug. “Looks good to me, exactly what we needed. SCADA exploit—Siemens TIA Portal, v15.9.1.”

“It will work?”

“One way to find out.”

Taras’s eyes narrowed. “They won’t see it?”

Maksym typed a little longer. “Fourteen megabytes. I can inject through the Human Machine Interface.”

Dima agreed. “We could get a file that size through without triggering anything if it’s hidden as a diagnostic check. Firewall’s flushed. We have root access. It might make a blip, but not enough for them to notice without the system flagging it.”

On the monitor, they watched Yuri sit on a bench, tugging off his long boots. Andrei stood over him, sipping tea and referencing a clipboard. More silent words passed between the two Russian engineers on the screen.

Taras watched for a long moment, then spoke softly:

“Winter comes early up there,” he said. “Let’s make it the coldest one they’ve ever had.”

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Nearly four thousand miles northeast of Kiev, in the frozen heart of Yakutia, Siberia, Yuri Sokolov peeled off his last layer of wool and hung it on a steel hook. The control room was warm enough, but the Siberian cold clung to him like a second skin.

Andrei was still talking, eyes on his clipboard—something about a transient spike an hour ago on one of the compressors at Node 7, as if his that weren’t routine.

Yuri wasn’t listening carefully. Spikes along the Power of Siberia pipeline—an artery stretching nearly 3,000 kilometers and studded with hundreds of compressor stations—were nothing new. The machines were always making micro-adjustments to keep gas flowing through hills, tunnels, and riverbeds. In winter, with mercury plunging far below zero, recalibrations were constant.

Yuri nodded politely, thinking of the snow. Andrei had no idea what awaited him outside—a blizzard thick enough to erase the access road. He’d need the company’s snowcat to make it home, crawling through white oblivion for hours.

In that kind of weather, Yuri was fine with sitting here in the pipeline control room, sipping tea and working his crossword. He had circled a clue: *Author of What Is To Be Done, 19th-century radical thinker* before leaving twelve hours ago and overnight, the answer had come to him: *Chernyshevsky*. That long answer should unlock the rest of the puzzle—and Yuri was anxious to pencil it in.

After walking through the checklist and initialing each line, Andrei stepped aside and walked Yuri through the myriad gauges. They were arranged on a platform the size of a kitchen island—forty sets of analog and digital readouts for temperature, pressure, and chemical variability. Redundant systems, the old Soviet habit. While the two men hunched over the dials, neither noticed the cursor on the terminal behind them begin to move, nor the characters that flowed in a hurry in the command line interface.

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In Kiev, the hackers of *Zorya Null* were jubilant. As Maksym predicted, the Siemens virus detection system hadn't flagged the fourteen megabyte file. Now it was doing its work.

"They haven't even glanced behind them," Kateryna said, eyes glued to the monitor, voice edged with satisfaction.

"Give them another minute," Maksym muttered, head bent over his keyboard, fingers flying like a concert pianist, sending a dozen commands. "Those gauges are about to pop."

"It's accepting you? Executing?" Taras asked.

"Oh yes. Perfectly." Maksym didn't look up. "I'm spoofing Modbus TCP packets straight into the machine controllers. They think it's a local command."

Oleh monitored the firewall logs, eyes flicking across cascading text. "No alerts. Detection system still blind. Rules flushed."

"Pressure climbing," Dima said, his tone flat, clinical. "Two-fifty bar. Two-sixty. Two-seventy."

Kateryna leaned closer to the video feed, watching the Russian engineers shuffle through their ritual. "And now," she said softly, "they're seeing it."

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Yuri turned toward the main console. “*Chto za khren?* What the hell... why is this climbing?”

Andrei frowned at the telemetry. “Pressure override.”

“From Blagoveshchensk?”

“*Nyet*. Local.”

“Did you set this?” Yuri’s voice cracked.

Andrei lunged to the keyboard. “I didn’t touch anything!”

Red lights strobed across the panel. A buzzer shrieked, drilling into the room.

“*Blyat!*” Yuri slammed his gloves on the console. “I’m locked out!”

Andrei typed furiously, fingers slipping on the keys. “No response. Local commands ignored—system’s doing something on its own.”

“Pressure’s at three hundred bar,” Yuri gasped, his face ashen. “Still rising! What do we do?”

“Kill the flow!” Andrei shouted.

Yuri tried. “Valves won’t respond!”

The two men froze, eyes wide and full of knowledge as the gas line that ran above their heads overpressurized. The first explosion was only twenty meters away from them—a force equivalent to twelve tons of TNT.

Far to the southwest, five young Ukrainians watched in silence as the screen flared white, then blinked off.

*

A few seconds later, alarms rippled across the East Asia watch floor at the North American Air Defense (NORAD) base in Cheyenne Mountain, triggered by the satellites of the Space-Based

Infrared System overhead. The global satellite monitoring network was known by its acronym, SBIRS, and its concomitant pronunciation: *sibbers*.

“Watch commander!” an Air Force tech sergeant called out from the center of the floor. “Thermal bloom—multiple hits!”

Air Force Colonel Sam Jones, sitting a few workstations away, sprang from his chair.

Behind him, Space Force Major Erin Hopkins stayed put, switching to a new diagnostic screen. “Geolocation?”

“Southeastern Russia. Siberia.”

“Profile reads petroleum-based fire,” she said crisply, studying a dialogue box fed by hundreds of computer servers beneath her feet. “Spectral signature doesn’t match rocket exhaust. No launch indicators.”

“We’re seeing secondaries,” the sergeant added, eyes locked on his screen. “Holy crap. Miles of secondaries.”

Colonel Jones jogged down to the main console bank. “Erin, get it up on the big screen.”

He stood with his hands on his hips watching the chain of explosions across Siberia, bursts of white connected like a diamond necklace. His secure cell phone clutched in his hand, the number to the Pentagon’s National Military Command Center preprogrammed.

The SBIRS telemetry scrolled in the data boxes: diameter, radiant intensity, Kelvin temperature, dissipation. Automated classifiers stamped the verdict: INDUSTRIAL EXPLOSION: NATURAL GAS INFRASTRUCTURE.

“Bring up the geospatial overlay,” Jones said.

“Yes, sir.”

NORAD’s servers fused the data with topographical mapping data. A second algorithm confirmed the coordinates against a Russian energy firm’s network. The conclusion was inescapable, a rupture in the gas pipeline that served China—Chayandinskoye to Beijing.

Jones traded a look with Hopkins.

He lowered his thumb from the button that would have sent the Pentagon into a frenzy.

“Report it, Erin,” he ordered through an exhale. “Industrial incident. Normal protocol. Priority three.”

“Yes, sir.”

The colonel backed to his chair, eyes locked on the scar of thermal blooms stretching for two hundred miles across the frozen Russian east.

“Jesus,” he muttered. “Someone over there just had one hell of a bad day.”

Chapter ONE

Arctic Ocean

14:09 Local Time

November 1

The Arctic night was black outside the Mi-8 helicopter's oval window glass, broken only by a scatter of stars. The polar sky had allowed for an hour of daylight around noon, but now even that was gone. Below, the frozen sea stretched in silence—a white desert under a half-moon's cold gleam.

Yevgeny Drago shifted in his nylon-web seat, the helicopter's rotors thumping overhead in a steady reassuring cadence. Head of the Russian Federation's covert Special Tasks Directorate—SSD—Drago was a man accustomed to shadows, but even for him, this mission felt like stepping beyond the edge of the map.

A fit man nearing sixty with thick hair that he dyed brown and combed straight back, Drago unclipped his belt and rose, earning a sharp glance from the aircrewman beside him. "Careful, General," the man said over the intercom. "Winds are unpredictable over the ice."

General.

Drago almost allowed a smile. His formal rank, Colonel General—a three-star— must have appeared on a manifest entry—a courtesy he neither corrected nor encouraged. He had traveled north in civilian clothes, as always; SSD demanded invisibility, even in sovereign Russian territory.

The Special Tasks Directorate—*Spetsial'nye Zadachi Direktorat*—was a relatively new arm within the *Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravlenie*, GRU, Russia's military intelligence service. SSD's mandate was simple and ruthless: fight in the gray zone, solve problems when the motherland, the *Rodina*, was cornered, and do so without leaving fingerprints. Cyber strikes,

sabotage, commercial exploitation—SSD was the switchblade where the rest of the GRU was an axe. And right now, thanks to Ukrainian treachery in the Siberian tundra, the *Rodina* needed Drago's help—of that, he was certain.

"I'm fine," Drago said into the boom mic, voice flat. He waved the crewman off and pressed his cheek to the cold glass, his stark blue eyes sweeping the void for what the senior engineer, Belkin, had promised him. The pilot had said they were close.

Frost crystals spidered across the window, intricate as lace. Beyond them stretched a blank field, brighter than he expected—the half-moon spilling silver across the snowpack, the multi-year ice reflecting it like a mirror.

"How far to the ship?" Drago asked.

"Three minutes," the pilot replied.

Come on Belkin, where is it?

Belkin—the civilian head of *Atomflot*, Russia's nuclear icebreaker fleet—was no stranger to the ops in the high north, but this was something else entirely. This wasn't routine Arctic navigation; it was an act of defiance against nature itself.

Drago's gaze swept the frozen expanse, hunting for the black thread Belkin had sworn he'd carve into the ice. He recalled his brother-in-law's voice—the deputy commander of the Northern Fleet—gruff with certainty: "It's impossible, Yevgeny Aleksandrovich. There's a reason we only send submarines that far north."

Drago craned left, then right, searching for proof of the promise.

Vot suka.

Sonofabitch.

There.

A teardrop of darkness, narrow at the tail, bulbous at the head—like an ink blot spilled across a blank page. Drago pressed closer to the glass, breath fogging the frost. Within that black wound floated shards of ice, pale flecks bobbing harmlessly in the churn. At the teardrop's

crown, floodlights burned. Water boiled. A steel hull loomed—and most beautiful of all, slicing through the Arctic night:

A wake.

“Coming into land, General,” the crewman said as the Mi-8 banked hard, rotors thundering against the Arctic wind. “Buckle up.”

General Drago dropped into his seat, cinching the belt and watching through the window as the helicopter flared over the pad. As a diabetic, he worried about his blood sugar and considered eating the protein bar in his pocket. But the helo’s descent was surprisingly quick. He would need to wait.

Once down, the crewman opened the cargo door. Snow whipped in furious spirals under the blades, a white tornado on the steel deck. Through the haze, a figure emerged—Belkin, grinning from the narrow opening of his fur-lined hood.

“You believe me now?” he shouted to Drago above the turbine roar.

Drago had intended to step off like one of the severe, commanding bosses he’d feared in his KGB days—stone-faced, unshaken. The KGB had been the *Rodina*’s sword and shield—Drago felt as though he carried on the tradition and wanted to show it, culturally. But the magnitude of what lay ahead—the audacity of it—overrode that. He masked the widening of his eyes, burying wonder beneath a curt nod as he stepped onto the deck.

The helicopter was off, now. Its turbines spooled higher, blades beating the air into submission as the Mi-8 clawed skyward, racing back toward Franz Josef and its earthen fortress of concrete and radar domes. The sound faded, leaving a silence so deep Drago could hear the Arctic breathe—the hiss of wind, the churn of engines, and beneath it all, the steady whisper of water where no water should be. He felt lightheaded and knew he would need to eat soon but didn’t want to spoil the moment.

That black corridor. That impossible wake.

He turned to Belkin, voice tight. “Show me.”

Belkin's grin sharpened. "Yes, *Gospodin*."

Drago and Belkin moved aft with deliberate care. The ship wasn't moving fast, but every surface was glazed in ice, treacherous underfoot. A few paths had been chipped clear, narrow scars in the frost, but even those were slick.

At the fantail, Drago gripped the rail and stared into the black corridor trailing behind them—a gash torn through the Arctic's white armor. "There, you see the results of our thermos-pulse arrays."

"How long before the melt activated by the nuclear-powered arrays refreezes?" he asked.

"Less than an hour," Belkin said, voice muffled under his hood.

Drago frowned. "That is hardly the path you promised."

Belkin's grin response was quick and confident. "One breaker ahead, another astern, and this ship in the middle—it would be like a train where the thermo-pulse equipped breakers are in the front, middle, and rear. Add a tanker to the convoy, and we can plod all the way to the Bering Strait without pause."

Drago tilted his head back, eyes tracing the stars. He was no celestial man, but even he could tell they were heading toward the pole.

"How thick is the ice here?"

"Three meters," Belkin replied. "But thickness isn't the only enemy—it's the composition. Multi-year sea ice freezes, thaws, and refreezes, squeezing out air bubbles. It becomes dense, hard as steel."

Drago's gaze swept the bow, its silhouette looming against the moonlit glare. "And even with the thermal arrays, the hull can still break ice that hard?"

Belkin nodded. "Most people think icebreakers ram into the ice. They don't. The bow rises up, then slams down, crushing the ice sheet under its weight. The thermal lances within the thermos-pulse systems weaken the structure first—superheating the ice until it's no stronger than a meter-thick slab. Well within parameters. We are slow, less than ten knots, but effective."

He gestured forward, where the bow rose and fell in slow rhythm, each impact sending a shudder through the deck. Along the hull, the lance housings glowed faintly under spotlights, bleeding heat into the frozen sea. Steam hissed where the Arctic surrendered, turning solid white into black water

The lightheadedness was too much. Drago yanked the protein bar from his pocket, stripped it over its wrapper and tossed the litter over the side. He looked across the sprawling frozen sea, shocked as he chewed and swallowed. From where he stood, caked under snow, reflecting moonlight, he felt as though he were traversing a desert rather than a frozen ocean seven times the size of the Mediterranean.

“And the thermo-pulse tech? No surprises?” Drago asked when his mouth cleared.

Belkin’s answer came without hesitation. “Arrays holding steady. Reactor output at seventy percent nominal. Heat-exchange loops balanced.”

Drago’s mind flicked back to the schematics he’d studied a year ago—the ones he’d dismissed as fantasy. Twin circuits branching from the reactor core: one feeding steam to the turbines, the other bleeding surplus thermal energy into the lance arrays. Brutal elegance, drawn in ink and equations. He’d doubted it could ever leave the page.

But here he was.

“And propulsion?” he pressed.

“Unaffected,” Belkin said. “Dual loops keep the turbines fed. Surge margin remains at twenty percent.”

Drago let the silence stretch, the Arctic wind tearing at his hood, his blood sugar equalized. The black corridor behind them shimmered under the moon, a line in the ice that should never have existed.

Belkin’s voice softened, almost reverent. “We are the first in the world to do this. One day, I hope we can proudly announce it. Like *Sputnik*.”

Drago stared into the abyss, the frozen empire that was no longer untouchable.

“No,” he said. “Bigger than *Sputnik*. History doesn’t announce the moment it turns. It simply leaves the unprepared behind.”

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