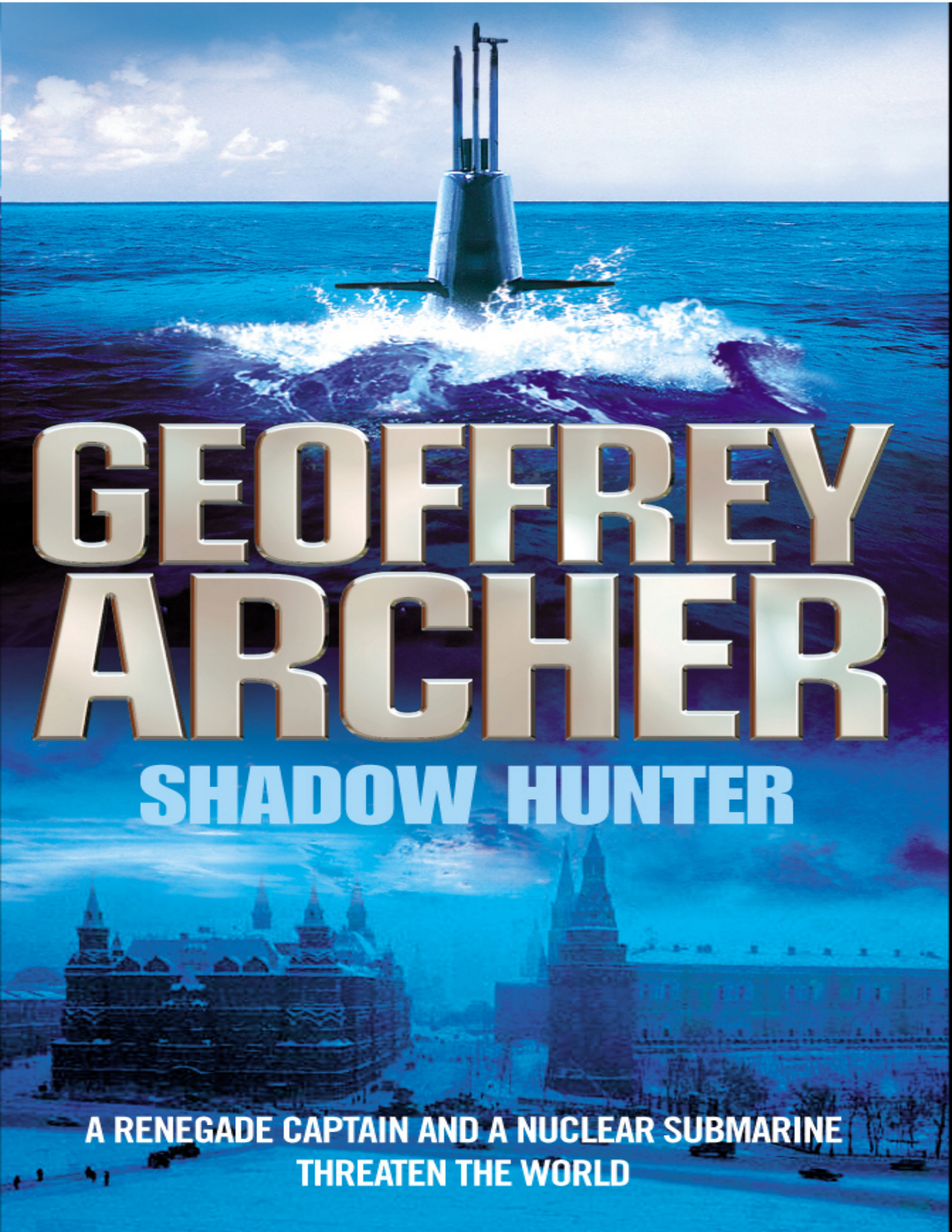




The background of the poster is a composite image. The top half shows a nuclear submarine's conning tower and periscopes emerging from a choppy blue sea under a bright sky. The bottom half shows a large, ornate Russian-style building with multiple towers and domes, possibly a government or military installation, set against a hazy sky. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and greys.

GEOFFREY ARCHER

SHADOW HUNTER

A RENEGADE CAPTAIN AND A NUCLEAR SUBMARINE
THREATEN THE WORLD

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About the Author

Geoffrey Archer is the former Defence and Diplomatic Correspondent for ITN's *News at Ten*. His work as a frontline broadcaster has provided him with the deep background for his thrillers – the bestselling *Skydancer*, *Shadow Hunter*, *Eagle Trap*, *Scorpion Trail*, *Java Spider*, *Fire Hawk*, *The Lucifer Network* and *The Burma Legacy*. A keen traveller, he now writes full time and lives with his wife and family in Surrey.

Also by Geoffrey Archer

Skydancer
Eagle Trap
Scorpion Trail
Java Spider
Fire Hawk
The Lucifer Network
The Burma Legacy
Dark Angel

Shadow Hunter

Geoffrey Archer



*To Eva, Alison and James,
for their encouragement*

CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday 16th October.

THE RESTAURANT WAS Greek. Kebabs and non-stick rice, washed down with retsina. Plymouth had a dozen like it; the evening trade was good in a navy town.

The watchers sat outside in a car, wishing they were inside so they could catch something of what the man and woman said to each other, but there'd been no spare table.

For a week, the two men from Special Branch had been shadowing the big blond man who claimed to be Swedish. The man had chatted up a young submariner in a pub, asking questions about nuclear propulsion that were too intelligent to be casual.

Up to now there'd been nothing; a dreary circuit of bars and dockside dives. Sometimes the man had drunk alone, just looking at faces. Sometimes he'd feigned drunkenness and joined in the raucous banter of the sailors, but there'd been nothing they could call a contact.

Clearly the man was searching. But for what? Information? Secrets? Or just companionship?

For most of the week the Swede had stayed in cheap lodgings. Then, that morning, he'd gone up-market - checked into the Holiday Inn. The receptionist had welcomed him as a regular client.

Now he'd met a woman, a classy one at that, judging by the way she dressed. Someone else's wife, they'd guessed. She'd come separately to the restaurant, kissing him as she sat down. They'd been given a table by the window, easily visible from the watchers' car.

'If this job had been important, they'd have given us the gear and we could hear what Blondie's saying,' one of the watchers grumbled.

'Don't need to hear it,' the other replied. 'He's talking dirty. That's what the hotel room's for.'

Nearly ninety minutes passed. Concentration was flagging.

'Hey, look!' one of the policemen snapped. The woman was agitated. She was clutching her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking.

'She's blubbing.'

They saw the Swede grab her hand but she pulled it away.

'Talking too dirty, you reckon?'

'Hang on! She's moving.'

The woman stood up, then scrabbled on the floor for her bag. The man reached out, trying to pull her back. He glanced round, embarrassed.

The door opened and the woman ran into the street. Disoriented at first, she pulled a handkerchief from her bag and dabbed at her eyes. Then, darting a look over her shoulder, she turned right and ran down the street.

The Swede stayed inside and called hurriedly for the bill.

'She's got a car, look. A Golf. You follow her - I'll take Blondie.'

The watcher closed the passenger door and slipped into the darkened entrance of a newsagent's shop. His companion started the engine and moved off in pursuit of the woman.

Three minutes passed before the tall foreigner emerged into the street. He looked around briefly, pulled a cigarette from a pack, and lit it. For a split second his gaze rested on the doorway opposite. Hand and cigarette hovered for a moment.

Casually he turned and walked up the road, passing one pub, but pausing uncertainly outside another. The watcher

was in the open now. He kept moving, knowing he'd been seen, but perhaps not yet recognized for what he was.

The Swede pushed open the door to the lounge bar. The watcher gave him a few seconds' start then crossed the road and followed him in.

The lounge was packed. No sign of him. The policeman eased through the crush to the bar, looking all around. He reached the counter and his eyes met the Swede's, inches away, grey-blue and hard as nails.

'Can you watch this for me? I must take a leak.'

The blond pointed to his pint of lager.

'Sure,' replied the watcher, unprepared.

The Swede elbowed his way to the gents'.

Did he know? Was his cover blown? The policeman dithered for just a moment too long.

He shoved through the crowd, drawing complaints and threats. Inside the toilet a cold wind blew through the wide-open window. Outside he heard a motorbike roar away.

'Sod it!' Blondie had been a professional after all, and he'd lost him.

* * *

Thursday 17th October.

It was weeks since Commander Andrew Tinker had worn a cap and the soft leather band felt like the steel hoop of a barrel. At sea submariners ignored naval formality, but heading back into harbour after six weeks on patrol, uniforms were brushed and smoothed, ready for the world of normal people.

'Funny smell.' Tinker sniffed, stepping clear of the hatch and stretching. He leaned his elbows on the edge of the tall, slim fin. The joke was an old one.

'It's called fresh air, sir . . . ,' the watch officer fed the expected line.

The early morning sky was grizzled, but there was no rain. Andrew gulped at the offshore breeze, rejoicing in its scent after weeks of confinement in conditioned air. As they rounded Penlee Point into Plymouth Sound, he could taste its sweetness; his senses peeled away the layers of smell – woodsmoke, wet grass, sea-weed.

It was like being released from sensory deprivation, every nerve newly sensitized. The gentle flapping of the bridge ensign was like a whip-crack to his ears, the light wind on his face seemed to tug like a gale.

He was pale; they all were after weeks without sunlight. However, a few brisk walks on the moors would soon bring the colour back.

The conning tower stood thirty feet above the casing. Dark green water washed like liquid glass over the fat, blunt nose of the submarine and away to the sides. There was no sound, no vibration from the powerplant deep below the surface. The black shape probed and the smooth sea yielded effortlessly to its penetration. Brutal. Phallic.

Eyes fixed on the parting of the waters, his thoughts turned to sex. They could afford to now that he was going ashore. He'd learned to suppress such feelings at sea. Within hours he'd be home; Patsy would be waiting for him.

'About forty minutes 'til we're alongside?'

'That's right, sir. First line ashore at 08.00 – that's if *Truculent's* cleared the berth in time. We should see her any minute.'

The lieutenant raised a heavy pair of binoculars and focused on the distant cranes of Devonport dockyard. The towering roof of the triple drydock dominated the view. At that range the black fin of their sister ship heading for sea would be difficult to spot against the vertical lines of the harbour side.

HMS Truculent was almost identical to Tinker's own *HMS Tribune*; a few pieces of equipment on board differed. Despite his eagerness to be home he envied *Truculent's*

captain. Commander Philip Hitchens was heading for the north Atlantic for biennial NATO exercises. This autumn the manoeuvres were being held closer to Soviet waters than ever before. Tinker enjoyed war games – stalking the massive American aircraft carriers and ‘sinking’ them with salvos of simulated torpedoes and missiles. It was a shame the patrol schedules had favoured Hitchens rather than himself. Hitchens would never admit to enjoying something as serious as war, even when it was just a game.

‘Steer two-nine-zero. Revolutions for five knots!’ Andrew ordered into the bridge microphone. They were passing north of Drake’s Island, the Hoe to their right dominated by the disused lighthouse known as Smeaton’s Tower.

‘Got her, sir! She’s just coming through the narrows.’

Andrew raised his own binoculars and followed the line set by the lieutenant. It was the *Truculent*, all right; and there was Phil on the bridge. The set of his head was unmistakable.

‘Great sight,’ Andrew whispered as the *Truculent* picked up speed towards them, bow-wave foaming.

‘The best there is,’ the young lieutenant concurred. ‘A five-thousand-ton black mistress! That’s what my girlfriend calls this beast.’

‘Jealous, is she?’

‘Hmmm. But they like to be jealous, don’t they, women?’

Andrew didn’t reply at first. He was very young, the lieutenant.

‘Planning to tie the knot, are you?’

‘No, not me. Not ready yet, sir.’

Truculent was less than half-a-mile ahead, aiming to pass a hundred yards to port. Tinker raised the binoculars again; the finely-chiselled face of Philip Hitchens stared straight ahead from the conning tower, cap pulled firmly down against the wind.

‘Come on, Phil,’ he breathed. ‘Give us a wave. You’re not making a movie!’

The two commanders had shared a 'cabin' at Britannia College, Dartmouth, and their careers had progressed in an undeclared spirit of competition.

It surprised Tinker they'd remained such good friends. Hitchens was so straitlaced he was a curiosity. He had breeding and style, yet often seemed overwhelmed by the responsibility of his work. His handsome features should have made him a 'ladies' man', yet Andrew had never known him make a pass at another woman, despite his own wife's questionable fidelity. Tinker found the mismatch of appearance and character intriguing.

Andrew saluted as the two black hulls passed one another silently.

'The bugger!' Tinker growled. 'He's not even acknowledging! Come on, Phil! What's the matter with you?'

To ignore the salute of a fellow warship was very bad form in navy protocol. Tinker sharpened the focus of his binoculars. His friend of twenty years was studiously ignoring him.

'Something we said, sir?' the lieutenant suggested blandly.

Within the hour they were alongside the jetty in Devonport submarine base, astern of the lustrous black hull of a sister boat just out of refit. Standing on the casing ready to welcome aboard the Captain of the Second Submarine Squadron, Tinker realized how tatty his own vessel had become. The black paint had lost its sheen and there were patches on the fin where sound-absorbent tiles had pulled away, the adhesive softened by weeks of immersion. *Tribune* would need a spell in the dockyard before her next patrol.

'Good morning, sir.' He saluted briefly.

'Morning, Andrew. Welcome home!'

Captain Norman Craig had eight nuclear-powered submarines in his squadron. He was responsible for the well-

being of the boats and their crews.

'Lovely day. Let's get below for a chat. Won't keep you long.'

Tinker followed him down through the hatch and into the wardroom where the stewards were pouring coffee. Debriefing was routine at the end of a patrol. The weapons and mechanical engineers would hand over reports on defective equipment so the mechanics at the shore base, *HMS Defiance*, could put it right. Personnel problems would be raised, and gossip exchanged, but the session was always kept brief. The members of *Tribune's* crew who were due to take shore leave would want to get home.

The briefing over, the two men crossed the quay towards *HMS Defiance*, the Captain hurrying to keep pace with Andrew's longer stride.

'Patsy picking you up?' Craig asked. Andrew looked at his watch.

'She'll be teaching. Home for lunch, I expect.'

'My car can take you back if you want.'

'You sure, sir? That'd be great.'

'The driver can't spend *all* day polishing it! It'll give her something to do. What time do you want to leave?'

'In about an hour? That'll give me time to complete my paperwork.'

The black Cavalier was driven by a WRNS, a plump girl with rosy cheeks and a warm Devon accent. As she swung the car expertly out of the suburbs of Plymouth and into the country lanes, they talked of the fortunes of Plymouth Argyll football club, of which both were fans. But the more she talked the slower she drove, which grated on his nerves, so he pulled a folder from his briefcase and pretended to read.

Coming home always made him anxious, gave him a fear that his domestic life might have changed radically while he'd been away.

The lanes grew narrower as they approached the village where he and Patsy had lived for the past four years. They'd had four different homes; appointments had moved him round the country, but they'd determined to settle in the West Country. Two limestone cottages knocked together had created a home large enough. The three children were away at boarding school; eight-year-old Anthony was just experiencing his first term of separation from his parents. School had started five weeks ago, so Patsy had handled the boy's last-minute tears on her own.

The red Devon soil glowed in the midday autumn sun. The car turned into a narrow lane and dived between banks and hedges. Soon it wound its way into the village of Yealmsford.

The vicar stepped out of the tiny post office carrying a newspaper, looked at the naval registration of the car, peered to see who it was, then waved in recognition.

He'll be getting me to read the lesson again before long, Andrew thought. The vicar said he had a voice that made the congregation sit up and listen.

The Tinkers were well known in the village and Andrew was a celebrity. To command something 'nuclear' carried kudos in this part of the world.

Patsy was out. It irked him she wasn't there to greet him. She taught in the mornings at the village primary school, but should have been home by now. He carried his small grip into the house – a submariner takes few possessions to sea.

The emptiness of the cottage alarmed him. With all the children away at school now, there were no toys littering the hall. He put his bag down and called out. No answer. Where the hell was she?

Then he heard her car.

'Oh, you're back!' Patsy looked startled, as she came through the doorway. 'I wasn't sure when you were coming. Have you been here long?'

She dropped her briefcase in the hall and hugged him. Her copper-coloured hair brushed his cheek; it smelled of shampoo and the cigarette smoke from the school office. He squeezed her and lifted her feet off the ground.

'I missed you,' she purred, the way she always did.

'Missed you too!'

'You didn't! You had your boat to play with!'

'Not as much fun as playing with you!'

She pushed him away with a forced smile. It was stupid, but she always felt shy when Andrew came home. To cope with his long absences she'd made herself unnaturally self-sufficient. His homecomings were like the arrival of a stranger.

'Have you had lunch?'

'No, and I'm starving.'

'I'm not sure what there is. You can come shopping with me later!'

He followed her to the kitchen. He was used to this; whenever he returned from patrol, Patsy seemed to feel the need to 'house-train' him again.

'It'll have to be a sandwich for now. With the children away, I haven't been stocking up.'

'I was worried something had happened. It's so quiet in the house . . .'

'I know . . .'

She looked pained. She would never tell him how lonely she felt at times.

'How was Anthony when you took him to school?'

'He howled all the way there, and I howled all the way back! But he's fine now. I got a super letter from him this morning. We can have him home for a weekend soon. He's dying to see you.'

Andrew watched her work. With Patsy having her own job, her own friends, and being life's mainstay for their children, he sometimes felt himself an outsider.

'I saw Sara this morning. She looked dreadful,' Patsy said, slicing bread.

'Hitchens?'

She nodded.

'She's having problems with Simon. He's going to be thirteen soon and still hasn't got used to boarding school. His headmaster's accused him of vandalizing microscopes in the biology lab. Sara's worried he'll turn to arson next!'

'That's appalling! Philip sailed today. He ignored my salute! Not like him at all. Perhaps he was worrying about Simon. Last thing you need when you're going to sea.'

'Last thing a *mother* needs at any time,' she stressed pointedly. 'Particularly Sara. You know how unstable she is.'

'Over-emotional, that's all.'

'You fancy Sara, that's your trouble!'

'I just feel sorry for her. She's not so good at coping as you are. And I have to take an interest. Simon's my godson.'

'Ohh! Well remembered!' Patsy mocked. 'When did you last even see him? Last year? Year before?'

'Oh, come on . . .'

'Sorry. That wasn't fair. Here's your sandwich.'

She passed him a plate and they sat down at the kitchen table. 'I'm afraid we're out of beer.'

She smiled apologetically.

'Welcome home!'

* * *

HMS Truculent.

Commander Philip Hitchens had seldom experienced claustrophobia, but now the cabin felt as narrow as a coffin, as *HMS Truculent* hummed towards the Atlantic depths.

For eight hours after leaving Devonport, Philip had hardly left the control room. Inshore waters were the most dangerous, and avoiding collisions took maximum

concentration. He didn't trust the watch; all young men, their minds wandered when he wasn't around.

They'd kept at periscope depth in the Channel; the sea was calm and visibility good. The sonar produced a jumble of tanker traffic, confused by echoes from the sea-bed, but he could see the ships clearly enough through the periscope up to five miles away.

Keeping busy had served another purpose, too; to distract his mind from the nightmare of the past three months, a personal nightmare of duplicity, the depth of which he had yet to fathom.

Now it was evening. South of Ireland, they were away from the shipping channels. Time to leave it to the watch. He withdrew to his cabin, to his solitary hell. Once there, he sat hunched at the foot of his bunk like a child. It was the furthest he could get from his work-table, from the framed photograph of Sara. Every time he looked at her picture, the shock, the misery, the pain engulfed him anew.

Betrayal! The word echoed in his mind like a slamming door; not just her – the bastard Russians, too!

He'd thought of putting the photograph in a drawer so as not to look at her, but ruled it out. Everything had to stay normal; no one must know. His cabin was also his office, visited by others. Family photographs were like icons in officers' quarters. Their absence would be quickly noticed.

He couldn't stop thinking of her. The night before they'd sailed he'd stayed on board, unable to sleep, knowing she was seeing that man again. She'd promised it was to say goodbye, to tell him they'd never meet again. But did he believe her? *Could* he believe anything she said, any more?

As for Simon – he couldn't imagine, didn't dare think, what his future would hold now. His son was the one restraint on what he planned. But he was at a good school; they'd see him right. Nothing must stand in his way.

There was a debt to be settled, vengeance for a past wrong, a terrible wrong which transcended all other

considerations.

'Captain, sir! Officer of the Watch!'

The tannoy loudspeaker above his desk startled him.

He leapt up from the bunk and clicked the microphone switch.

'Captain!'

'Sound room's got a sonar contact. They think it's a trawler, sir.'

'I'm coming now.'

His cabin was just yards from the control room. He was there within seconds, glad of the distraction. Trawlers were the bane of submariners' lives in coastal waters. Fouling their nets could mean the early end of a patrol.

He headed for the navigation plot. The submarine's position was being provided by SINS, the Submarine Inertial Navigation System, a gyroscopic device that had proven remarkably accurate.

The navigator and officer of the watch was Lieutenant Nick Cavendish, a twenty-five-year-old on his first patrol with *Truculent*.

'Depth?'

'Seventy metres, sir. Thirty metres under the keel.'

'Should be okay at this depth. What's the contact's bearing?'

'Ten degrees on the starboard bow. Range unknown.'

He stared at the chart. They were approaching the edge of the continental shelf west of Ireland. A few more hours and the sea bed would drop thousands of metres, giving them all the water they could want to avoid hazards trailing from the surface. The chart showed no obstructions for miles.

'I need more sea room. They're bloody long, those trawl wires. Officer of the Watch, come round to 210.'

'Aye, aye, sir. Helm! Port thirty. Keep course two-one-zero.'

Best to take no chances; trawl nets were undetectable until their hawsers scrapped the acoustic tiles off the casing, by which time it was too late.

‘Anything else on sonar?’

‘One other surface contact up to the north-west, very distant. Sounds like a tanker. No submarines, sir. And none expected for the next twenty-four hours, according to the intelligence sitrep.’

Philip shot a glance round the control room. In the centre, the oiled steel periscope shafts glistened in their deck housings. About a dozen men, ratings in blue shirts, officers in white, were concentrating as the boat manoeuvred. The planesman at the one-man control console operated the stick that ‘flew’ the submarine through the water, marine engineers monitored gauges for the trim valves and propulsion system, and seamen, some of them not much more than eighteen, peered at the amber screens of the tactical systems.

Those who caught the captain’s eye looked away quickly. They didn’t like him much, the men of *Truculent*, but they respected him, and that was what mattered. He’d need that respect when the crunch came in a few days’ time.

Across the room at the weapons control console, the weapon engineer officer, Lieutenant Commander Paul Spriggs was talking to a rating. Hitchens liked Spriggs; the man was crisp and concise in the way he handled his men, everything by the book. Spriggs would be vital to him at the end, a WEO who wouldn’t question orders.

Philip hovered by the chart table, pulling out the sheet for the north of Scotland and the water between Iceland, the Faroes and the Shetlands. Known as the GIFUK (Greenland, Iceland, Faroes, UK) Gap, this was NATO’s underwater front line, a strategic barrier through which Soviet submarines should not be able to pass undetected on their way to the central Atlantic.

A ridge of sand, mud and rock ran between the land masses, along which the US Navy had laid a string of hydrophones known as SOSUS, SOund SURveillance System, able to detect the passing of almost any submarine. Sonar-

equipped surface ships and aircraft patrolled above, to complete the barrier.

Truculent was taking part in Exercise Ocean Guardian, which involved over a hundred NATO ships and submarines, practising the reinforcement of Norway and control of the Norwegian Sea.

'Are we going tactical on the transit, sir?' asked the WEO. 'See how many Yank skimmers we can zap before they get a whiff of us?'

'Certainly not!'

Heads turned at the sharpness of Philip's reply.

'Sorry, sir,' Spriggs mumbled. 'Thought that was the plan.'

'No,' Philip repeated softly, conscious of his overreaction. 'We've got to avoid any risk of detection. We're blue at first, as you know. But then we go unlisted.'

Paul Spriggs frowned. He'd attended the pre-patrol briefing in the Northwood headquarters of Flag Officer Submarines, along with the captain and the first lieutenant; that briefing had certainly put them playing 'blue' (NATO) first, but by midweek they were due to switch to 'orange' (enemy). There'd been no mention of their going 'unlisted'. That meant some sort of secret mission, usually intelligence gathering deep inside Soviet waters.

'Will you be briefing us on that, sir?' he asked edgily.

Hitchens felt his face begin to flush. They were staring at him.

'Yes, WEO. In due course,' he answered curtly.

He stepped into the sound room adjoining the control room. Cordell, the tactics and sonar officer, was listening intently on headphones. Three ratings sat at panels controlling glowing green video displays. Here, the myriad sounds of the deep detected by hydrophones spread round the bulbous bows were translated into vertical patterns and gradations of light, unintelligible to the uninitiated. One of the ratings stood up from his seat and crossed to a cabinet

to change the laser disc on which every sound detected was recorded in digital code.

‘Got a hiccup with sonar 2026, sir.’

Lieutenant Sebastian Cordell had removed his headphones.

‘Processor’s gone barmy. The CPO’s going to change a board, see if that cures it.’

The 2026 was the processor for the second sonar array, a yellow plastic tube over a hundred metres long, filled with hydrophones, towed a thousand metres behind the submarine. The computer for analysing the sounds it detected was highly sophisticated, and had developed a fault.

‘How’s that fisherman doing? Still tracking it?’

The possibility of the trawl net slipping like a sheath over the nose of the boat haunted Hitchens.

‘We think she’s passing clear astern, sir. Shouldn’t be any risk of fouling now.’

‘Thank God. You’ll keep me informed on the 2026? I want a report on it.’

‘Of course, sir.’

People seemed to be staring at him. He’d keep moving; didn’t want them reading his face to see what he was thinking.

He passed back through the control room, heading aft, telling the officer of the watch he was making his rounds.

He sensed a conspiracy around him. Of silence. They knew about Sara!

They’d heard gossip ashore. Must’ve done. In the pubs. Perhaps some had even heard that sod of a chief petty officer boasting about how he’d screwed the captain’s wife!

How would he have described it? Bonking? Poking?

Anger made his head swim. He put out a hand to steady himself as he made his way to the tunnel that crossed the top of the reactor to the machinery spaces beyond.

When the penny had dropped just a week ago, it was like a blow to the stomach. He'd taken Simon, home for the weekend, shopping in Plymouth for construction kits to take back to school.

Strolling down Market Avenue, Philip had vaguely recognized CPO Terry from years before. He'd remembered the face, but not the name – until Simon called out, 'Hi Reg!' He'd sounded so pleased. The CPO had grinned at Simon, then glanced uncomfortably at Philip.

Surprised the boy should know Terry, it had been a minute or two before he'd asked about it.

'Just someone I know . . .' had been Simon's reply.

He'd felt panicky, suddenly aware how little he knew about his son's life. The boy was away at boarding school for most of the year, and when he was home for the holidays, Philip was more often than not away at sea. But why should he know Reg Terry?

He'd pressed him to say where they'd met.

'At home. He used to come and see us sometimes, me and Mummy.'

A door had suddenly opened into a world he knew nothing about.

Philip reached the airlock and turned the bar-bell handle that withdrew the heavy bolts securing the outer door. He was almost exactly in the middle of the submarine, forty metres from the dome of the bow-sonar, forty more from the end of the cowl that housed the silent propulsor at the stern.

He closed the outer door behind him and opened the inner one. He was now standing on top of the reactor. Beneath his feet the controlled uranium reaction generated enough power to serve a town of 50,000 people, the potential of the nuclear radiation to destroy his body cells held back by thick lead shielding.

There was no sound from the thousands of gallons of water being boiled into high-pressure steam below him.

Millions of pounds had been spent on research into silencing the powerful pumps that circulated the cooling water through the reactor core, pumps whose reliability was essential to the life of the submarine.

He passed through into caverns packed with the machinery that drove his boat and generated the megawatts needed for its electrical systems.

Those who saw Philip greeted him smartly. The work of the men 'back aft', essential to the silent operation of the boat, was not considered as 'macho' as that of the weapon crews 'forrard'. Philip was conscious some COs tended to ignore the mechanical end of the boat, which was physically separated from the forward section by the reactor compartment. They may not like him, but he wouldn't be guilty of that.

Did these men know about Sara? What if they did? He must act normally, show no sign of weakness. His authority mustn't be questioned.

In the officers' quarters forward, Lieutenant Commander Paul Spriggs had returned to the cramped cabin he shared with the wiry first lieutenant, Lieutenant Commander Tim Pike. The first lieutenant was second in command - the executive officer and 'general manager' of the boat.

'Tim, at the ops briefing at Northwood . . . ,' Spriggs began.

'Mmmm?' Pike put down the nuclear propulsion manual he'd been studying for forthcoming promotion exams. 'What of it?'

'They said "free play", didn't they? Defined areas of sea, but we can do whatever we like within them?'

'Well, they didn't say we couldn't. But it's supposed to be a fast transit up to the Lofotens.'

'Yea, but if the opportunity's there, it's okay. That's what I said to the old man, but the silly sod jumped down my throat.'

‘What? Our own dear warm-hearted Captain? You astonish me.’

‘He was really narked. Then he went stomping off on an inspection.’

‘Must be that time of the month. Mind you, they could have said something different to him afterwards. He had another session with FOSM later.’

‘Did he? I didn’t know. That fits what he said, that we’re going unlisted.’

‘Unlisted?’ Pike frowned.

‘You didn’t know either?’

‘He . . . er, hasn’t seen fit to brief me yet.’

‘Bloody hell, Tim! You’re his second-in-command!’

Pike smoothed the ginger stubble he called a beard, his pale grey eyes betraying the wounded pride that came from being deputy to a man who trusted no one.

‘I’m sure he’ll tell us “in due course”, Paul.’

‘ “At the right time”, you mean.’

‘ “When we need to know”.’

‘You’ve been reading the rule book again!’

Pike shrugged. ‘I’ve been through this before with Hitchens. Made an issue of it once. Wasn’t worth it. He went out of his way to be bloody to me for weeks afterwards.’

‘You don’t surprise me. But tell me: you’ve worked with him longer than I have – how do you rate him as a skipper?’

‘He knows his stuff. And he’s the one with the most gold stripes. That’s what matters when the chips are down. If I had a run-in with him, the men with scrambled egg on their hats would back him up to the hilt. They’d drop me like a lump of shit!’

* * *

Friday 18th October.

Vice-Admiral Feliks Astashenkov looked round cautiously as he entered the arrivals hall at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport. He was not in uniform and had flown from Murmansk under a false name. The plane had developed an engine problem at the start of its taxi run; the passengers had had to wait on board for three hours while an Aeroflot mechanic repaired it.

As one of the *Vlasti*, the 'powerful ones', he was unused to such demeaning treatment. The Deputy-Commander of the Soviet Navy's Northern Fleet was entitled to better than that. But the message from the Soviet leader, delivered to his home by a courier, had insisted on maximum secrecy for their meeting.

At Murmansk Airport a KGB guard had recognized him. It was inevitable that someone would. He'd slipped the man ten roubles, told him he was Moscow-bound for a weekend with his mistress, but that his wife thought he was on a fishing trip. The policeman had passed the note across his mouth. His lips were sealed.

The silence he'd bought was to keep the journey secret from the Northern Fleet Commander, Admiral Andrei Belikov, rather than from his wife. Belikov was just a vassal of Admiral Grekov, Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Navy, who'd been at odds with Nikolai Savkin, the new Soviet leader, from the moment he'd taken over.

They told Astashenkov he'd be met at Sheremetyevo and taken to the rendezvous. He elbowed his way through the crush, impatient at the willingness of his countrymen to accept such conditions. Astashenkov felt apprehensive. He'd been given no reason for this unorthodox summons to Moscow. He'd met the General Secretary on several occasions, admired his energy and reforming zeal. Nikolai Savkin was of his own generation, a man with the vision to press on with change even though the birth pains of the new, competitive Soviet Union had become intolerable to many of his countrymen.

Comrade Savkin was in need of friends, no doubt about that. Was that why he'd been summoned? But why him? It was in the factories and the Politburo that Savkin's support was waning. The armed forces had stood back from the arguments over the economy. And why call for him at this precise moment, when a massive fleet of NATO warships was assembling a few hundred kilometres from the Soviet coast for 'manoeuvres'? At a time like this he should be at his headquarters in Severomorsk, studying intelligence reports, ready to take action if the 'exercise' turned into something else.

'Comrade Vice-Admiral . . .'

The touch on his arm was casual, as if someone had merely brushed against him.

'Please follow me.'

It was the courier who'd delivered Savkin's message. Dressed in a brown parka with a fur-lined hood, he moved through the crowd slowly enough for Astashenkov to follow with ease. Not once did he turn his head to check; to anyone watching, the two men would appear unconnected.

They stepped outside. It was after eight in the evening and dark, and the October air had a nip of frost. The Admiral spread the gap between himself and his escort. Ahead was the car park; Astashenkov fumbled for keys, as if he had a vehicle of his own to go to.

The messenger stopped by a battered yellow Volvo estate and opened the door on the driver's side. Astashenkov paused, placed his overnight bag on the ground and began to feel in his inside pockets, while looking around to see if he was being observed. The passenger door of the Volvo was pushed open. He climbed in.

They drove for nearly half-an-hour, the courier making it plain he had no wish to talk. Astashenkov had spent several years of his career in Moscow, but the part of the city through which they travelled was unknown to him. He

suspected that the driver was making the route circuitous in order to confuse him.

They stopped in an old quarter. He followed the driver into what would once have been the townhouse of a prosperous merchant. Feliks was mystified; all this subterfuge for a meeting with the Soviet leader? What was going on?

Inside it smelled damp, as if seldom used. An oil heater burned in the hall. A guard emerged from the front reception room, carrying a sub-machine gun. The escort removed his parka and helped the Admiral off with his coat. Then he led the way upstairs.

Savkin seemed smaller than Astashenkov remembered, as if the burden of a national crisis had begun to crush him. At the sound of Astashenkov's entrance, the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and President of the USSR stopped in mid-pace across the room.

'Ah, Feliks! A tired, impatient victim of air travel! And they always call it a "technical" fault, don't they?'

The smile looked forced. The pure white mane of hair looked as if it had not seen a comb all day.

'They wouldn't let us leave the plane! We were like pigs in a pen.'

'All the more reason for me to be grateful that you came.'

'It was my duty, Comrade General Secretary.'

Savkin's eyebrows arched momentarily. 'Duty' was such a subjective concept. Where would the Admiral feel his 'duty' lay once he'd heard what Savkin had to say?

'Come and sit down. I must apologize for the room.'

He waved a hand dismissively. The walls were faded and peeling, marked with dusty rectangles where paintings had once hung. A heavy pedestal desk in one corner was half covered with files from an open briefcase. Savkin led the way to a green, leather chaise longue, and sat himself in the high-backed armchair opposite.

'The house belongs to the Pushkin. It's not used much, only for storing spare exhibits. My wife's cousin is curator of

the gallery, so my link with the place is personal rather than official, which means it's clean – no bugs. And the guards here are my men. They'll bring us tea in a moment. Now, remind me. When was the last time . . . ?'

It was a gambit. Savkin would remember perfectly well. Such urbanity did nothing to calm Astashenkov's unease.

'It was June. At Polyarny. *Podvodnaya Lodka Atomnaya*. The nuclear patrol submarines – your inspection.'

'Of course.' Savkin nodded. 'It was a good turnout. Very impressive. Fine technology. The efficiency of your men was so vibrant you could almost touch it.'

'They were on their best behaviour. You must be used to that.'

'Yes, but you can tell when it's just show . . .'

There was a tap at the door, which had been left ajar. It was the guard bringing the tea. Conversation lapsed until he had left the room.

'Now. Why do you think you're here, like this?' His tone of voice was condescending, keeping the Admiral at a disadvantage. He would be asking a lot from Astashenkov, but did not want to appear to be a beggar.

The Admiral shrugged. There was no point in prevaricating.

'I really don't know. It might be that you require some service from me which would not win the approval of my Commanding Officer . . . ?'

Savkin smiled drily. He'd wanted a forthright reply. It saved time.

'And if that *were* the case . . . ? If neither Grekov not Belikov were to be involved?'

'Then it would be a difficult decision. I should need to understand why.'

'Of course.'

The grey eyes studied the sailor. Astashenkov recognized in them the flicker of uncertainty and weariness.

‘Let me ask you something,’ the General Secretary said. ‘I’ve gained the impression, on the few occasions we’ve met, that your interests stretch wider than just naval matters. That *perestroika* has caused you some excitement; that you welcome it. Am I right?’

‘It’s my duty to be politically aware . . .’ Feliks stalled.

‘Yes, but you know I’m talking of more than awareness, Comrade. I’m talking of *commitment*.’

Astashenkov looked blank. Savkin would need to be more explicit.

‘The changes on the farms and in the factories, and in the public services – making our people more responsible for their labour, and rewarding them individually – is a process I believe you support in principal, Feliks. But that process, as you know, is now at its nadir. People’s lives have become harder, but not yet better. Faith in the policy has crumbled. It’s no secret that the Zhiguli car factory has been on strike for two weeks because the enforcement of new quality standards has cut the workers’ bonuses. What *is* still a secret, however, is how fast the strikes are spreading. Within two weeks, fifty per cent of our industrial production may be at a standstill.’

Astashenkov let out an involuntary low whistle.

‘Yes. It’s as bad as that,’ Savkin was pleased he’d been able to startle the Admiral. ‘And the strikers are supported by the majority of the Party. The *Nomenklatura* can hear the death-rattle of *perestroika*, and plan to finish it off!’

‘But then what? A return to the old ways? They must know that’s impossible now.’

‘Is it? Are you sure?’

Astashenkov sensed he had been trapped.

‘Well . . . I’m only a submariner. I’ve no real understanding of economics . . .’

Savkin was not satisfied with that answer. He waited for Astashenkov to continue.

‘It seems impossible to me. If we’re not to be at an economic disadvantage for ever, we must produce at a price and to a standard that will enable us to compete worldwide. To return to a system of quotas without accountability . . .’

He knew he sounded if he were parroting one of Savkin’s own speeches. But it was what he believed.

‘So you think we must continue with the policy? *Perestroika* at any price?’

Astashenkov breathed in deeply and let out a sigh. He sensed a noose tightening.

‘It’s what they accuse *me* of,’ the General Secretary persisted. ‘The *Nomenklatura*. They say it’s my vanity, that I can’t admit the policy is a failure.’

‘Not all the *Nomenklatura*, Comrade General Secretary.’ Feliks himself held one of those appointments which had to be approved by the Party.

Savkin frowned. Impatiently he pushed his fingers through the straggling white tufts at his temples.

‘Feliks, I need to know how far you yourself will go, in supporting me?’

* * *

An hour later, Feliks Astashenkov stood outside one of those slab-sided apartment blocks that fill much of Moscow’s suburbs. Savkin’s courier had dropped him at the end of the road, as he’d asked, and he’d walked the last few hundred metres to Tatiana’s flat. He was badly in need of the fresh air, which was cold enough to numb the end of his nose. What Savkin was planning had shaken him to the core.

He’d telephoned Tatiana the day before, to check she would be at home that evening. Opportunities to see her were so infrequent nowadays, he seized them whenever they arose. But now, as he stood looking up at the lighted windows, trying to remember which one was hers, he regretted making the rendezvous. Solitude was what he