

A NOVEL

VOLK'S SHADOW

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chapter 1

A man like me is not supposed to have doubts.

Especially not at a time like this, poised in the open fuselage of an Mi-24 assault helicopter, carving a tilted arc around a black square in the grid of lights on Moscow's south side. This is the worst time to be asking myself questions that can't be answered. But lately they're always there, corroding all those things I once believed so intensely. Defend the motherland, secure our southern flank, protect the innocents. Gripping a canvas strap to brace against the force of our turn, I whisper the words in a soundless incantation.

The AMERCO building rises from the darkness, a fiery, open wound torn midway up its south face. Smoke glows in chemical-pink wreaths against the night sky as the helicopter swoops, flares, drops to a hard landing. I leap out while the rotors are still thumping the air in a dying backbeat rhythm.

A policeman jumps in front of me. He shouts something about Chechen terrorists. The blast happened less than an hour ago, he yells,

but I already know that and more. I circle my finger in the air impatiently, and he points the way to an improvised command center. Charging away from him toward the burnt skyline, I think that what he should have said is that the *first* blast is less than an hour old. More explosions might come, because at least two terrorists remain alive.

I am here to change that.

The General's orders, issued over a scrambled satellite phone, ricochet inside my mind. Do not delay. Do not negotiate. Attack. Dead hostages, destroyed property—whatever the costs, they will be less than the price of capitulation. Orders birthed by hard experience fighting a shadowy war against a faceless enemy. Orders that mean I don't have the luxury of doubt.

My path brings me within sight of the blown-out half of the sixth story of the targeted high-rise, the Moscow headquarters of an American oil company. Its southern side gapes like a screaming mouth, bent steel beams and metal studs for a tongue, belching smoke. The damage appears worse from here than it did from the helicopter.

Moving faster now, I rush past a staging area for the dead and wounded, set back about a hundred meters from the edge of the zone where rounds from the building might reach. Many of the wounded are missing pieces. Limbs, eyes, and, in the case of one shrieking boy, part of his jaw. Each step drives nails into my left foot—the foot that is not there—a phantom pain, the product of being this close to my old adversaries, entering a world of horror, knowing what is to come.

The millennium Moscow bombings in Pushkin Square left 150 dead, the takeover of the House of Culture Theatre 130, just two among so many others I can't bear to think of them all. The worst for me was the Beslan school massacre, during which 344 died, including 186 children. The architects of many such attacks are dead, some of them killed in operations memorialized by secret medals I've tossed into a cigar box, but others have risen to take their place.

The makeshift command post has been established in the first-

floor lobby of an office building three blocks away from the one that was bombed. I cross a wide street emptied of traffic. Slam open the steel-and-glass door. A small group huddled around a folding metal table all turn to stare at me.

“Who’s in command?” My voice sounds loud even to my own ears.

“Who wants to know?” Tall, thin, and spectacled, he looks like a haughty professor, although too young to be one. I know his kind at a glance. A staffer, privileged from birth by his family’s social position in the old Soviet order. His uniform and red beret identify him as a special forces officer of the internal troops of the FSB—the principal successor of the KGB—but his kind can be found throughout Russia’s military, political, and bureaucratic elites.

I throw off my overcoat so that he can see my rank on the tunic beneath. He turns his back to me.

“I’ll get with you later, Colonel.” He spits out the words as though he’s trying to rid his mouth of a bad taste.

“Now.”

He whirls to face me, lips twisted into a snarl. “You’ll not speak again until I address you. Is that—”

And I am upon him, wrenching him onto the table. It collapses under his weight and the force of the blow. A laptop crashes to the floor with him as he smacks the marble facedown. I plant the heel of my combat boot on the back of his neck.

“Who is second in command?” I say, so softly that everyone in the room leans forward to hear me.

A florid-faced policeman snaps smartly to attention. “I am, sir. Inspector Barokov.”

The FSB officer under my boot struggles to rise. Or to reach a gun. I pull my Sig, bend down, and crunch it against the side of his head to knock him out. Then nod to the inspector to go on.

Still saluting, he tries to draw himself straighter. “The Chechens took the AMERCO offices on the sixth floor. We didn’t have time to

contact them before a bomb blew. We're lucky the whole building didn't come down. We don't know how many are dead, and we can't get inside."

He waits for a response. I'm not surprised the building still stands. Its bones were erected during Stalin's heyday, when labor was forced at the end of a bayonet and buildings were made of steel, brick, and mortar laced with blood. I flick my right hand toward my brow. He drops his salute, but remains at attention.

"Two terrorists are left on the north side of the sixth floor with maybe ten hostages, depending on how many from the office are still alive."

"How do you know all that?"

"They released a hostage to communicate their demands."

I could not possibly care any less what the terrorists want. In my mind's eye I can see the General's granite features, like a craggy Neanderthal's, his heavy lips moving. *Do not negotiate.*

Barokov points with his chin to a woman sitting in a reception chair, doubled up with her hands cupping her face. She appears to be crying. All I can see of her is ash-blond hair and a soot-stained pantsuit with a long rip running down the sleeve. Another uniformed FSB officer, a lieutenant, stands stiffly beside her, but he does nothing to question my authority. He roughly jostles her shoulder to get her attention, and she looks up at him, then turns to face me. She has shell-shocked green eyes wet with tears. She's overwrought, nervously fingering a blue pendant swinging from a chain around her neck and looking back and forth from me to the officer.

"You heard what he said?" I ask her. "Two terrorists, ten hostages, sixth floor. That's correct?"

She glances at the officer. "Yes. There were two of them. Both on the sixth floor." Her Russian is bad, with a heavy American accent.

I turn away, gathering my thoughts. "Show me the building layout."

Inspector Barokov unrolls faded, tattered blueprints while others set the table upright and then stand aside, looking everywhere except

down at the professorial FSB agent oozing blood onto the polished floor.

“They’re here,” he says, pointing to a wing of offices toward the middle of the building. “We might be able to get in here.” His finger lands on a stairwell that I can see is accessible only by entering the building directly below where the terrorists are thought to be.

I grunt and pull the plans closer, searching for a likelier path, sliding my finger along the crinkled paper to an exterior door on the west side of the building. The portal is tucked beneath an overhang six floors below and roughly thirty-five meters from where the hostages are being held.

“That door will be locked,” Barokov says. “And getting there will be a problem. But there are only two of them, so if you can make it inside, the stairs probably won’t be guarded.”

The lock doesn’t bother me. But he’s understating the difficulty of getting there. The path to the door will be a scramble through the terrorists’ field of fire. The darkness might provide cover, but not if they have night-vision goggles, which they probably do. The American military hands them out in Iraq the way it handed out sticks of chewing gum in France after World War II. Except that in Iraq the goggles are then sold to the people trying to kill American soldiers—free enterprise as practiced by Iraqi insurgents.

I page through the plans to the structural sheets. The main building is twelve stories high. It narrows six stories up, the center column rising like a thick candle in the middle of a cake. The sixth-floor ceiling is dropped, with a crawl space above it. Less than one meter of clearance. I roll back several pages of plans to find the one I want, then consider for a moment, trying to burn the drawing into my mind like light onto a photographic plate.

Barokov clears his throat and steps back. The former hostage is still quietly crying. Back at the helicopter a team of five combat-hardened commandos awaits my orders, and the chatter in my radio, mostly confused shouts, tells me that a separate Vympel antiterrorism

unit is deploying nearby. But I can hear the General's voice in my head, urging me forward. *Do not delay. Attack.*

I turn away from the group and radio my squad leader, talking in a low voice into my hand-cupped mouthpiece. Instruct him to deploy around the perimeter, storm the building at the first sound of fighting, save the hostages if he can, worry about me last. Then I set aside the radio and strip down to black paratrooper pants and tactical body armor over a long-sleeved, collarless shirt made of a body-hugging synthetic. Slide the Sig into a nylon holster. Adjust the knife hanging below the back of my neck. Take one last look at the plans, and then I'm out the door, where I wait for a moment while my eyes adjust to the pinkish gloom.

"Who the hell was that?" I hear Inspector Barokov say behind me.

chapter 2

Chunks of blasted concrete and scattered building materials offer the illusion of cover on my approach to the blasted AMERCO building. I avoid the islands of light where the fires still burn. Crouch, crawl, slither, and slide—all well-practiced maneuvers. Street fighting is in my blood from three years of little else in bombed-out Grozny and the surrounding villages. After Grozny I spent most of two years in the icy forests of Ingushetia and the snowcapped mountains of Dagestan. Right up to the moment of my surrender—and six long months in a *zindan*, a mud pit, where time was measured by the shivering intervals between torture sessions. Within minutes I make it to the smoking building, my back against a brick wall, sweating despite the chill air, but breathing easily. No gunshots, no shouts. Nothing.

The door is locked from the inside, the lock well made. I spend nearly ten minutes picking it by the light of flickering flames, probing with small metal tools, alert for a cry of discovery. When it finally tumbles, the mechanism sounds like a reverberating gong. I wait another

minute, my breath fogging the air. Still nothing except for wailing sirens, crackling fires, and distant crowd-control instructions amplified by a megaphone. I wedge through the heavy door and close it gently behind me.

The stairwell seems as deserted as Barokov thought it would be. Another surprise, because I thought he had underestimated the danger here as well as on the approach to the building. Outside sounds are muted. A dull roar fills my ears, accompanied by popping flames that have grown louder, magnified as though the inside of the building has become a giant hearth. The steps are made of concrete edged with metal toe-kicks, the walls lined with tubular handrails slick from condensation.

I ascend the stairs slowly, quietly, pausing at each landing while the structure groans around me like the hull of a sinking ship. Reach the sixth floor and squeeze through another door into an abandoned hallway filled with smoke and drifting paper. Slide along a wall beneath portraits of smug executives to an oak door leading into the room we identified on the blueprints. Inside is a wide area partitioned into cubicles. I place a chair against the wall closest to where I think the hostages are being held, nudge aside a ceiling tile, and peer into the dark crawl space.

In the light of a handheld torch that barely penetrates the smoke, the heavy I-beams disappear into the grayish haze, crisscrossed every five meters or so by steel braces. Suspended below them is a strip-metal grid that holds fiberboard ceiling panels identical to the one I just removed.

I sheathe the torch. Hoist myself onto the top of the wall at the level of the drop-ceiling grid. Straddle a beam, gripping with my thighs for balance. Creep along the sweating steel, moving noiselessly, making good progress, the darkness so complete I can't even see across the span to the parallel girders I know run along both sides of the one I am on. I worm forward for about three minutes, counting each transverse brace to measure the distance, choking on unseen gusts of ashy air, blinking away particles of soot and dust. When I've covered thirty-

five meters I think I am directly over the hostage room. Except for the muted snarl of popping flames on the other side of the building and the distant clamor of sirens, everything is deathly quiet. Too quiet if the hostages and their captors are below. Not even a murmur or rustle of movement comes to me.

And then an eruption of light from the beam across from me stabs my eyes.

“You’re dead,” says a muffled voice.

The shocking glare strikes so suddenly I lose my grip. I let myself fall, not in a planned dive or some other well-executed evasion, but just a clumsy tumble that takes me straight down through the flimsy ceiling tiles to crash onto a desk in the room below. All of the air blows from my body.

Five meters away the second terrorist, his vest bulging with explosives, mouth covered by a swath of black cloth, stares wide-eyed at me. The muzzle of his Kalashnikov droops uselessly as he struggles to process my sudden appearance. Above us, his partner fires blindly through what’s left of the drop-ceiling beneath him. The stitching of bullets races toward his comrade and explodes his skull. All the while I lay writhing on the broken desk, helpless, while random bursts from the man on the beam spray more bullets. One or more slugs must strike the dead man’s vest, because an explosion rips through the room.



When I was a boy assigned to the work farms I pretended to be a Stakhanovite, a shock worker like the famous miner who always exceeded the norms. On rare days off, I imagined I was Ilia Muromets, the legendary protector of the Russian people, battling invaders with my giant, gentle strength. But when things were really bad I tried to disappear, to detach from my body and float away. That’s the sensation I have when the explosion hurls me through the air in a long, weightless tumble. Everything after that is a confused haze—searing pain, shouted curses, rough hands, a jolting ride.

I open my eyes to find a ring of faces staring down at me. “He’s alive!” someone says, and they begin cheering. The red-faced police inspector Barokov drops to a knee next to me and probes my body for injuries, pausing when his hands encounter the rigidity of my prosthesis.

“Nothing appears to be broken,” he announces. More cheering and clapping, but not enough to blot out the sirens or the crackle of flames that are now burning with renewed intensity. “You saved them!” another voice says.

I sit up and rest my elbows on my knees. I’m on a stretcher on the street outside the ruined building. I can’t seem to draw a full breath. Everything hurts. My face feels as though it’s been washed in acid. Wetness on my forehead turns out to be blood, which looks like chocolate syrup on the end of my fingers. The fabric of my shirt and pants has burned through in the places not covered by armor. Scorched flesh on my arms and legs triggers licks of pain. Standing is hard work.

“What happened?” I ask Barokov.

“Fifteen minutes after you left, the building blew again. We thought everyone was dead. Your men stormed in and found all ten hostages, alive. They’d been moved to the first floor, on the east side. They say the terrorist holding them vanished after the second explosion. Three of your men retrieved you after they rescued the hostages. The Vympel unit found parts of two dead terrorists.”

Disturbing questions slosh around in my mind. Why did the terrorists bother to move the hostages away from the danger? If a third terrorist was guarding the hostages, how many more were there? And how did they know where to wait for me?

I stride off toward the improvised command post. No shuffle, no limp, nothing to reveal weakness except for the slight roll caused by the rebounding spring in my prosthesis. The inspector jogs beside me to keep up, weaving through rescue workers and soldiers, who are everywhere now. Eyes shining and wearing a broad smile, he claps me on the back like an old friend. “You’re a hero!” The voices in the trailing crowd echo his sentiments, but they barely penetrate my consciousness.

We arrive at the command post, where I enter and shut the door on my admirers. Pull my overcoat back on. Wrap the clothes I removed earlier in my tunic and throw the bundle over my shoulder. Glance down at the forgotten FSB officer. He's curled up like a child, his face ghostly white against a canvas of pooled blood leaking through a makeshift wrap of torn cloth. I wonder why his lieutenant left him this way, then shake away the question and take a moment to gather myself.

The setting was urban, not rugged mountains the way it was in the past, but the attack bears familiar hallmarks. During the time he had me in the pit, Chechen rebel Abreg liked to talk about everything—philosophy, religion, global politics—so I have a window into how his mind works. He knows the psychological value of soft civilian targets, and he would argue that a strike such as this is a justified response to the devastation in Chechnya. But too many things don't add up. Why this building? Why trigger the bombs in the early evening, a bad time for a high body count in an office building? Why protect the hostages?

Inspector Barokov and the others are still waiting when I step back outside, probably so they can offer more unwarranted congratulations.

“What happened to the woman—the hostage?”

They exchange uneasy glances. The inspector's ruddy features appear even more flushed as he squirms under my gaze. He's short and roundish, but now he tries to stretch himself taller. “We don't know. She and the FSB lieutenant disappeared right after you left.”

“Who is she?”

Barokov looks to his comrades for support that fails to come, takes a deep breath. “Everything happened very fast. She spoke English, very little Russian. The only person she talked to was the FSB man in there. The one you hit.” His jaw hangs open for a moment, then snaps closed. “I'll take him to the triage area now, but we're not going to get any information out of him for a while.”

“The hostage—did she work for AMERCO?”

“That's what she said.”

“What happened after I left the command center?”

“Nothing. We waited.”

“Did anybody talk about how I planned to get inside the building?”

A shadow ripples across his face. “We looked at the blueprints and guessed at some things.” He shifts his weight from one leg to the other, then looks me full on. “Lots of people were talking on their cell phones. Everything was happening so fast, anyone could have—”

He steels himself, like a boy about to deliver bad news to his father. “I’m sorry, Colonel. I didn’t think to lock everyone down.”



Five minutes later the ground falls away and I’m airborne through flurrying snow, arrowing north in the Mi-24 helicopter back toward the Kremlin to brief the General. During the bumpy ride a medic stitches my head then strips me down to the waist and applies salve to my burns. He’s wasting his time. The pain is nothing to me, and I don’t care about scars. These will only add to the road map of conflict already carved into my body—a decade of Russia’s military hot spots memorialized in scar tissue.

My chronometer beeps. I was on the ground for less than an hour.

chapter 3

The General is waiting for me in his subterranean headquarters in the bowels of the Kremlin, so close to the Moscow River that the rock walls weep condensed moisture. A bare bulb hanging next to a soggy wooden beam throws more shadows than light. He sits behind his ebony desk without moving, seemingly carved there from stone himself while he appraises me from the dark hollows beneath his ridged brow.

“You’ve lost weight.”

Six months have passed since the last time we saw each other in person, just after Valya hobbled away on crutches to be lost in the crowds at Sheremetevo-2 terminal. Since then my assignments have been routine: north to St. Petersburg to intercept a drug shipment and shepherd it over the border into Finland, east to Tokyo to eliminate a rogue ex-KGB agent selling secrets and lies, all of my international travel done under a diplomatic passport. Right now I smell like smoke and grilled flesh, and parts of me feel as if they’re still on fire, so I’d prefer to end the

inspection and get on to business, but the General, as always, plots his own course.

“You look like a half-starved wolf.”

The passing months have roughened my edges instead of smoothing them as he might have hoped. Dislocated by the loss of Valya, my humanity is in regression, and I don’t know what I can do to reverse the course.

After another moment he lowers his gaze to study photos of the bombing. “That was good work. You killed two terrorists. But we figure at least fifty civilians died in the first explosion. We’ll know for sure later. They’re still collecting the pieces.”

“I’d be dead except for luck.”

His head is still canted down. Resting his elbows on the desk, he applies a thumb to each temple, presses hard enough to make white orbs of skin around his thumbs, and massages in tight circles. “Luck?” He sounds distracted, as though the events at the AMERCO building happened weeks, not minutes, ago. “I doubt it.”

He shuffles some papers on his desk. “Do you know Filip Lachek?”

“No.”

“I’ve had dealings with him before. Like yours, his name suits his reputation.”

Volk means wolf, of course; the General has always liked the idea that he commands a vicious animal. The root of the name *Lachek* means hunger.

“Lachek cleans up Putin’s messes,” he says. “Like you do for me. But Putin has become a god now that our oil is pumping rivers of money into his pockets.” His tone is bitter. His features harden and darken, like magma solidifying into rock. “I missed out on that. I didn’t act fast enough.”

Putin has nationalized Russia’s largest oil and gas companies, forcibly repurchasing assets and imprisoning those who disagree with his prices, his methods, or his politics. Through his control of petro-

chemicals, he now wields enough political and economic power to bring entire countries to their knees.

"I received a call from upstairs." He motions above his head, figuratively pointing through several meters of rock to the better-known buildings of the Kremlin. "Lachek wants the name of the colonel who took back the AMERCO building. Says it's urgent."

"Why?"

"I'm still trying to find that out, but along with everything else that's happening his inquiry doesn't bode well. I won't be able to put him off for long. You understand."

He means I will be on my own, that Lachek is beyond his ability to control. The General has been a father figure for me since the early '90s, when he plucked me from Isolator 5 prison, a bestial place where men fought for scraps of meat and a place to sleep. I was sixteen, barely holding on. He arranged my education and training and has managed my career ever since, often placing me in harm's way, but my debt to him can't be repaid. The idea that he won't help me troubles me only a little. I'm used to it. The fact that this latest attack—scores killed, a prominent high-rise destroyed—is only a part of what's bothering him concerns me far more.

"What *else* is happening?"

Ignoring my question, the General rustles two stapled pages from the pile in front of him and slides them across the desk to me. "Lachek is in his mid-fifties. Fought in Afghanistan, air force. Stationed in Singapore until a few years back. Wet work all over Southeast Asia—drug interdiction, antiterrorism—all clandestine, buried so deep even I'm not privy to the details. Since '03 he's been Putin's man here in Russia. One of them, anyway."

I crinkle the brief into the pocket of my overcoat, planning to read it later. Each movement rubs blistered skin against fabric. "I need names and background information of the hostages."

"Why?"

"I don't understand why they were moved to safety."

His icy gaze holds mine for several seconds. Then he scratches a note on a pad on the desk in front of him. “Give me a few hours.”

“A woman was in the command center, claiming to be a hostage the terrorists had released.” I try to draw a mental picture, but all I can conjure is a navy blue suit covered in soot and streaked blond hair draped over her hands cupping her face. “She gave bad information about how many of them were inside the building, and she disappeared before the second explosion. I think she also tipped them where to wait for me. According to a police inspector on-site, she’s American.”

Deep, parenthetical furrows on either side of his mouth draw tight and he lowers his head to stare at the table. His eyes are hidden beneath his cantilevered brow, so now it is my turn to appraise him.

The General commanded the notorious Fifty-eighth Army, responsible for the invasion and brutal occupation of Chechnya during the second war there. During my time with him I never glimpsed remorse or self-doubt. Once I saw him suffering and in pain, but even then no hint of deeper emotion escaped the leathery ridges of his heavy mask. Now he’s a deputy cabinet minister, ostensibly reporting to the minister of defense, but in truth the only limit on his power is whether he has the resources to take it and hold it. His underground organization permeates military affairs, politics, business, and crime—or, more precisely, the soupy amalgam that passes for those things in the new Russia.

All of which is more astonishing because the General is a dwarf. The top of his oversized head reaches less than one and a half meters. In a culture that despises physical weakness, the titanic ambition that impelled his rise to power is beyond my reckoning.

He drums the knuckles of his left hand on the desk, apparently still thinking about the woman in the command center. “Terrorist recruits come from everywhere nowadays. Who knows, maybe she took on an American accent. Maybe you weren’t set up at all, and they just had a man posted there.”

I try to recall the sequence of events on the I-beam. Smoke-filled

gloom stabbed by a laserlike beam of light, then, almost in the same instant: *You're dead*—spoken in a muffled voice, but one that comes back to me in flat, unaccented Russian as I replay the sound of it in my mind.

The General gets up and totters in his swaying gait to a humming freezer that sits on the stone floor near his desk. He pulls out a frosted bottle of vodka and pours liberally into a water glass, then returns to his desk, where he cradles the sweaty drink on his lap.

“Something’s wrong here, Volk,” he says in a tone that straightens my spine. “Too many things are happening, all too suddenly.”

I say nothing, wary of the change in him.

“The call from Lachek is serious, I think, and . . .” His voice trails off.

Nearly a minute passes in silence while I mentally compile a list of all the things that might follow the word *and*. A red dot the size of a laser sight starts blinking on an electronic panel appended to a row of three phones on his credenza. He stares at it, transfixed, then makes a sound like a low growl.

“What do you know about the Imperial Easter eggs?” he says.