

The Russian Soul – a novel,
and
**Self-Translation and Re-Writing
in Ferré, Duranti, Goldsworthy and Radić**

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ABSTRACT

This PhD consists of a novel, *The Russian Soul* and a critical study entitled ‘Self-Translation and Re-Writing in the Works of Ferré, Duranti, Goldsworthy and Radić’.

The Russian Soul is a dark comedy and conspiracy thriller set in contemporary London, Rome, Moscow, Mexico and Cambridge. The plot concerns the fate and whereabouts of a Fabergé jewel that may hold the key to the future of Russia and its natural resources. The main characters are: a former Russian soldier, Alex Gorsky, the oligarch Kaganov and his wife Milla Ivanovna, British and American intelligence operatives, the Mexican drug-lord El Guapo Medina and Senka Golovkin, a chess master, among others. The narrative is polyphonic, with multiple points of view, and relies heavily on irony and humour.

I wrote this novel in two versions, one in English and one in Serbian. The critical component looks at the interplay of languages and the translingual and self-translation practice of contemporary authors, Rosario Ferré, Francesca Duranti, Vesna Goldsworthy and Nebojša Radić. This study informs my own multilingual literary practice and argues for self-translation to be viewed as a discrete literary activity.

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Self-Translation and Re-Writing in Ferré, Durante, Goldsworthy and Radić

No writer wants to play second banana to another writer,
least of all to himself.
Gustavo Pérez-Firmat (2003: 108)

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 My rationale

My interest in the subject of literary self-translation stems from my own multilingual writing practice. I am a native speaker of the Serbian and Italian languages. I have been living in English-speaking countries for over twenty years and I have become a proficient user of the language. I have written fiction in Serbian, Italian and English and I have translated literary works from Italian and French into Serbian. As part of the present PhD in Creative and Critical Writing, I have written a novel, *The Russian Soul* in two languages, in Serbian and in English.¹ I wrote the first, initial version in Serbian and while I was working on the English text, I queried the nature of my writing approach. Was I writing a new, different text in English or was I translating the Serbian text? Was I producing a single text in two languages or two different texts? The space between the two versions held temporal and psychological qualities, how is it to be defined?

¹ The Serbian title of the novel is *Извештај о словенској души* (Cyrillic) or, in Latin transliteration, *Izveštaj o slovenskoj duši*.

Furthermore, based on my experience as an author and translator, I notice that while my practice draws on the experiences of both creative writing and translation, it also proposes new forms of communication and expression. The self-translator is the author of both the first and second texts and his/her creative writing and translation practice overlap. In the present study, I conduct research into the relevant theoretical issues and explore aspects of the practice of self-translation in the works of three authors. The findings will inform my own understanding of this form of expression as well as my multilingual writing practice.

1.2 Aims of the Study

The literary scholar Ottmar Ette points out that, within the context of a multilingual, global world and transnational literatures² the ‘distinct boundaries between writing and translating are no longer appropriate’ (2005: 110).³ Ette refers to two separate acts, one of writing and one of translating, that are carried out by two separate people: the author and the translator. In self-translation therefore, where the writer and the translator are one and the same person, such ‘distinct boundaries’ must be even less appropriate. The comparative literature and translation studies scholar Susan Bassnett argues that, in the context of self-translation, ‘the binary notion of original-translation appears simplistic and unhelpful’ (2013: 15). The question arises thus, what other possibilities are there for self-translation and how can the first and the second, self-translated texts be understood otherwise?

Bassnett suggests that ‘the term self-translation is problematic in several respects, but principally because it compels us to consider the problem of the existence of an original’ (2013: 15). She argues that the very definition of translation implies the existence of a previously produced text somewhere else. The discipline of translation studies acknowledges thus, the authority of the first text, the ‘original,’ while self-translation practice challenges such an authority, as the self-translator is able to re-write, modify, adapt and/or amplify the text. The translation studies scholar Rita Wilson argues that self-translation opens new possibilities for the original (2009: 197). Hence, it is not only the case that self-translation challenges the

² The term 'transnational literatures' was introduced by the author and translator Arianna Dagnino (2015).

³ ‘Trennscharfe Grenzziehungen zwischen Schreiben und Übersetzen sind hier nicht mehr angebracht’. All translations in this work are mine unless specified differently.

authority of the original but also, that this practice offers a range of ‘possibilities’ and opportunities within a fairly under-explored multilingual creative space.

The present study aims to investigate this relationship between the first (‘original’) and second text (‘translation’) by analysing the practice of self-translation in cases where authors produce their work in a consecutive fashion, with an interval between the writing of the two texts.⁴ I aim, therefore, to explore the range of ‘possibilities’ that the two texts as well as the self-translating authors have. To do so, this study looks at the practice of self-translation and the status of the original text in the context of the work of Rosario Ferré, Francesca Duranti and Vesna Goldsworthy who write in Spanish, Italian, and Serbian and English respectively. Furthermore, a number of scholars cite a lack of academic interest in the process of self-translation (Boyden and Bleeker 2013) and the present study aims to fill that void.

1.3 Research Questions

The translation scholar Helena Tanqueiro argues for self-translation to be considered as an ancillary line of study within the framework of literary translation studies (2000: 62). In line with this view, the working hypothesis of the present study is that a self-translated text can bring into question the first text, the ‘original’, and that self-translation is a specific phenomenon, distinct from both (monolingual) creative writing and translation. As such, self-translation should be approached as a *sui generis* practice that offers a wider spectrum of creative possibilities and be considered and studied as a discrete literary form.

To explore these issues, I will address the following research questions:

1. How do Rosario Ferré, Francesca Duranti, Vesna Goldsworthy and Nebojša Radić see their own self-translation practice?
2. How do the writing practices of these writers contribute to debates on the status of the original text?

1.4 The Methodology

⁴ Rainier Grutman distinguishes between ‘simultaneous’ and ‘consecutive’ self-translations and this point will be discussed in more detail in the Critical Issues section of this chapter.

To answer the research questions, I will review the relevant secondary literature on self-translation and analyse the process in the practice of the Italian Francesca Duranti, the Puerto Rican Rosario Ferré and the Serbian/British Vesna Goldsworthy and Nebojša Radić. Ferré and Goldsworthy wrote the first versions of their novels in English and Duranti in Italian. They subsequently self-translated their texts into Spanish, Serbian and English respectively. Nebojša Radić wrote the first draft in Serbian and the first complete text in English.

Researchers in the field of self-translation have highlighted two issues in need of further investigation. Firstly, the comparative literature and translation studies scholars Jane Hokenson and Marcella Munson argue that ‘only a few critics [...] have studied self-translation in three or more authors and languages, rarely with any historical coverage or theoretical development to speak of’ (2006/2014: 10). To address this point, I investigate the work of three authors who wrote in English and three other languages (Spanish, Italian and Serbian) that belong to different linguistic groupings (Romance, Germanic and Slavic) and historical and cultural contexts. To address the second point, the theoretical framework of this study is clearly defined and grounded on the work of André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett who propose a view of translation as re-writing (Lefevere 1992/2017 & Bassnett 2013).

Secondly, the translation studies scholars Michael Boyden and Liesbeth De Bleeker maintain that most of the scholarly work on self-translation is product-oriented, rather than process or function-oriented (2013: 180). Such scholarship does not focus on issues related to the actual writing process or the ways in which self-translation is received by the audience. In this study, I will address the first part of this point and rather than focus on the dichotomy self-translation/translation or the ‘products’ (texts) of these activities, I will look at the writing process *per se* as it is described and documented by the authors and the relevant critics.

Upon analysing the self-translation process of these writers, I will compare the outcomes and draw conclusions about the nature of their practice and the status of the ‘original’.

1.5 The Structure of this Study

This study is divided into five chapters. In the introductory chapter I describe the aims of the study, introduce the research questions, explain the methodology and review the relevant literature on self-translation. In Chapter 2, I analyse Rosario Ferré’s self-translation practice in the case of her novel *The House on the Lagoon*. In Chapter 3, I analyse Francesca Duranti’s

self-translation practice in the case of her novel *Sogni mancini*, and in Chapter 4, I analyse Vesna Goldsworthy's self-translation practice in the case of her novel *Gorsky*. In Chapter 5, I investigate my own self-translation practice. My findings are discussed in Chapter 6.

1.6 Critical Issues

1.6.1 Bilingualism – Bilingual Writers

The first necessary condition needed for self-translation to take place is a degree of linguistic ambidexterity and a multilingual condition. The literary and translation studies scholar Anthony Cordingley suggests that 'bilingualism or multilingualism is a common phenomenon, possibly more widespread in the world than monolingualism' (2013: 1). Since many people today are bilingual, it is then clear that many authors must be bilingual too. Bilinguals may acquire their languages by spending their childhood in a foreign country with their family, through formal education or through migration (Helmich 2016: 15). In today's globalised world, all three of these ways of acquiring a second language are becoming more and more accessible to more people who fulfil, therefore, the first and most important requirement to becoming a self-translating author.

The translation studies scholar Alexandra Kroh defines as bilingual 'anyone who finds in a second language the sensation of being at ease, the certainty of mastering the rules of the game and knowing how to transgress them not from ignorance, but to obtain a desired effect' (Kroh 2000: 11). This view is grounded in the practical realities of a modern, global society that requires sound practical communicative competence such as implicit grammar knowledge, operational proficiency and communicative skills as opposed to an explicit mastery of the grammatical rules and a native-like accent.

Bassnett recalls how the translation theorist and her close collaborator André Lefevere and herself had both been educated as bilinguals. They were enthralled, she asserts, by linguistic and cultural difference (Bassnett 1998, vii). Bassnett expands thus the technical, linguistic properties of bilingualism to include those of bi-cultural competence. The linguistic aspect of bilingualism gives access to the cultural 'content' of both cultures and it leads to their appreciation and eventually to a comparison of the salient characteristics.

Bilingual/bi-cultural people have the innate ability to use both of their languages to write fiction. The literary studies scholar Stephen Kellman coined the term 'trans-lingual writers' to

describe authors who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one (Kellman 2000: ix). Such authors may resort to writing a single text in different languages or to writing different texts in different languages (Kremnitz 2015: 18). Those who decide to '(re-)write' or 'translate' the same work in a different language, engage in the practice of self-translation.

1.6.2 Self-Translation

In order to define self-translation, it is first important to offer a definition of translation. The linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson asserts that translation is 'an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language' (1959/2000: 114). Jakobson focuses on the text and views translation as the act of interpreting verbal signs of the source language using verbal signs of the target language. Bassnett and Lefevere, however, draw attention to the wider, cultural and historical context in which languages are spoken and texts written. They argue that translations are never produced or, indeed, received in a historically and culturally empty space and that translation is an open communicative process that cannot be studied as an isolated, linguistic phenomenon but only in relation with power and patronage, ideology and poetics. They argue that 'abstract' translations do not exist and that there are no criteria as such for the evaluation of translations on purely linguistic merit (Lefevere & Bassnett 1998: 3; Lefevere 1992/2017).

Lefevere and Bassnett further assert that that the object of study of the discipline has been redefined and that we need to study the text within its network of both source and target cultural signs (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990). They call this shift in emphasis 'the cultural turn' where 'cultural' is understood to be the aforementioned network of cultural signs.

Following in their footsteps, the translation studies scholar Cristina Marinetti maintains that 'translation as a process cannot be explained through the simple mapping of linguistic correspondence between languages or judged with respect to universal standards of quality and accuracy' (2011: 26). The argument Lefevere, Bassnett and Marinetti (among others) advance about language being imbedded in a given cultural, historical and political context shifts the focus from the text and its linguistic properties to a broader context. In this study I take into consideration this broader, metalinguistic context that authors operate within.

The translation studies scholar Anton Popovič defines self-translation as 'the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself' (1976: 19). Popovič assumes

therefore the existence of a first text from which the self-translation is derived and in doing so, recognises the authority of this (chronologically) first text. More recently, the Canadian translation scholar Rainier Grutman defines self-translation as the ‘act of translating one’s own writings or the result of such an undertaking’ (1998: 18). Grutman makes a clear distinction between the ‘act’ and the ‘result’ of self-translation without reference to the status of the texts or, as he calls them, writings. As we see, both Popovič and Grutman, in their definitions, accommodate the view that translations are heavily contextualised cultural constructs that cannot be studied by comparing them to ‘original’ (‘first’) texts (Bassnett 1990: 4). Self-translation, therefore, is also to be viewed and analysed within its broader cultural, historical and political context.

The practice of self-translation is often little visible or ‘invisible’ even to practising self-translators and researchers in the field (Gentes 2016: 18). Tanqueiro, for instance, asserts that very few writers translate their work (2000: 58). However, she takes into consideration the total number of writers as opposed to looking at bilingual writers only. As per our previous discussion, a bilingual ability is a disposition necessary for self-translation. A fair account would, therefore, draw conclusions about the frequency of the practice based on the number of bilingual authors. Grutman points out that eight (one in thirteen) Nobel Prize laureates self-translated their work (2013: 70). If we consider the fact that not all of the laureates are bilingual, the occurrence of self-translation among bilingual laureates will certainly not be negligible.

The translation theorist Julio-César Santoyo notices that self-translation has been considered a marginal phenomenon, a sub-field of translation studies and as such, systematically neglected (2006: 22). He argues that self-translation is much more common than it is given credit for and that it is a wide-spread form of literary practice with a long tradition (2005: 85). Cordingley agrees that this practice has been marginalised and asserts that ‘the self-translator has been a relatively neglected species within the menagerie of translators’ (2013: 1). Grutman, on the other hand, notices that ‘self-translation is frowned upon in literary studies’ (1998: 17). We see, therefore, that from the perspective of both translation and literary studies, self-translation is seen as a peripheral phenomenon that sits rather uncomfortably between these two well established literary fields.

It is indeed, a matter of debate whether self-translation is a form of (bilingual) writing and as such should be studied within the field of comparative literature, or it is a form of translation, in which case it should be the subject of research in translation studies (see Fitch

1988, Grutman 1998, Gentes 2016). By the very nature of self-translation, the author belongs to at least two linguistic and literary communities and such a ‘divided’ literary (and often physical too) presence makes them less ‘visible’ to scholars who operate within the framework of specific national literatures and languages (Grutman 2013: 189).

Belonging to two (at least) linguistic communities and often also geographical and national entities, affects in many ways our most intimate feelings and abilities. The Australian translation studies scholars Rita Wilson and Leah Gerber argue that recent research in the history of literary self-translation has shown that self-translation is an expression of the most intimate and intellectual properties of the ‘self’ (2004/2012: x). Their work focuses on immigrant literature and in that context, they maintain, self-translation occupies a central position in constructing the identity of the bilingual, bicultural author for it brings together the culture and language of the old and new homelands.

Wilson argues that the ‘self’ resides in a language, and that fundamentally, reality is a linguistic construct. The ‘self’ inhabits the first language, and when we turn to another language and seek to express ourselves within this new ‘reality,’ the ‘self’ shifts, reproduces and re-builds itself anew. She asserts that trans-lingual authors translate the ‘self’ into the ‘other’ and that self-translation is a vital concept for it allows such authors to bring together both the ‘original’ and the re-located cultural-linguistic ‘self’ (Wilson 2011: 124).

Wilson perceives ‘reality as a linguistic construct’ and language, according to her, is a reality in its own right. There cannot be two ‘same’ texts in two different languages for there cannot be two identical realities in two languages. Self-translation is, according to Wilson, linked to our perception of reality as well as our representations of the self within that given reality. This bilingual, bi-cultural self is different from its monolingual counterpart while it retains, at the same time, a sound psychological and intellectual integrity. As the work of psychiatrists such as Mary V. Seeman shows, there are no indications that such a bilingual, bi-cultural condition leads to schizophrenia or any other psychological disorder (Seeman 2016).

Following Wilson’s observation, trans-lingual writers and self-translators speak their monolithic reality in different languages creating what the comparative literature scholar Mikhail Epstein (2015) calls, ‘stereo prose.’ Such a ‘stereo’ effect is achieved where two languages express a specific concept giving us a sense of multi-directional perspective, a function similar to that of our two eyes that creates an effect of tri-dimensionality.

Epstein's 'stereo-textuality' is to be understood as a form of verbal creativity and in the future, he suggests, we can see the development of disciplines such as stereo-poetry, stereo-philosophy, stereo-aesthetics, and stereo-criticism that 'will draw from a variety of languages and capitalize in meaningful ways on different world views' (Epstein 2015). The implications of such a procedure being implemented could be significant in terms of expression but also in terms of identity and creative space. For instance, a full and meaningful expression of a bilingual country or territory such as New Zealand should entail the production of texts (or, a text) in both English and Maori that would enable Kiwis to better articulate their identity within the context of the English-speaking world.

While the idea of 'stereo-effects' is appealing, it must be said, though, that its limitation is that only a compatible (same language combination) bilingual can fully enjoy it. An example of such a 'stereo-textuality' is certainly Benvenuto Lobina's 1987 novel *Po' cantu Biddanoa*. The novel was only ever published in a bilingual edition, in the Italian and Sardinian (Campidanese) languages.⁵ The left-hand pages feature the Sardinian text and the right-hand ones the Italian text. The title is only one – in Sardinian. By opting to have one title only, Lobina asserts the organic nature of his literary project – one author, one text, two languages. The author's target audience, therefore, are bilingual Italians and Sardinians who can benefit from a 'stereo' reading of his bilingual text.

Lobina wrote his novel as a bilingual project and the two texts were conceived and written at the same time (Dettori 2014: 90). It is clear, however, that the potential hiatus between the writing of the first and a subsequent second text in another language could represent a space of emotional and intellectual activity conditioned by the cultural and political environment. As per Wilson's assertion about language featuring a reality in its own right, such a conditioning changes the author's perception of reality and their reading, their understanding of the first text. Such a powerful shift makes alterations, modifications and amplifications of the second text more likely.

Grutman points out that self-translation is 'chronophagous' – time-consuming. He maintains that self-translation is a complex, tri-dimensional rather than binary ('original' – 'translation') activity situated not only within a 'cultural' context but also within a temporal

⁵ Dettori (2014: 91) notices that, in the novel, there is a pronounced linguistic difference between the more standard Sardinian of the narrator and the local dialect of most of the characters. This means that not even his depiction of the Sardinian linguistic (or otherwise) identity is monolithic.

framework (2016: 1). Grutman makes the distinction between ‘simultaneous’ self-translations, where two versions of the text are produced at the same time or at least while the writing of the first is still in progress, and ‘consecutive’ self-translations that are produced after the completion of the original (Grutman & Van Bolderen 2014: 327). He observes how the self-translating Irish author and Nobel Prize laureate Samuel Beckett narrows the time gap between the production of the first and second text and how, in doing so, he blurs the distinction between the two (Grutman 2013: 191). Beckett, asserts Grutman, even inverts the chronological order of the versions abolishing the distinction between ‘original’ and ‘version.’ The notions of ‘original’ and ‘translation’ are therefore, in the case of such as Beckett’s works, completely redundant and we can understand such a writing as a single homogenous text produced in two different languages.

For the purpose of this study, I call ‘open’ a self-translation that has the potential to ‘look back’ and influence the ‘original’ text. All simultaneous and most consecutive translations fall into this category while a ‘closed’ self-translation is one that for any given reason cannot influence the first text. This is the case with many published first texts with special reference to those where the time gap between the first and second text is considerable.

The Irish author Samuel Beckett, or the South African André Brink, produced open texts. While we have no direct insight into Brink’s writing process, his well-documented fascination with making and seeing the world differently leads him to open the communication lines in a way that the two texts can reciprocally influence each other (Viljoen 2005: 161). Brink ‘bounces’ back and forth between two ‘open’ texts. By doing so, he erases the hierarchy between the first and the second text and consequently, between the original and the self-translation.

While simultaneous self-translation is not of immediate interest in this study, the practice informs my investigation in terms of what Wilson calls the ‘new possibilities for the original’ (Wilson 2009: 197). Santoyo acknowledges that ‘open’ texts influence each other and come to form a new linguistic and literary reality. He asserts that such a textual relationship:

... creates a sort of complementarity between the original and its translation, a reciprocity whereby one text supplements and/or depends on the other, as both texts become, de facto, the head and tail of the same coin. [...] Thus forming a unique text in which original and translation are both complementary and appear intimately bound together, face-to-face and back-to-back constantly intertwined in one textual entity. (Santoyo 2013: 31)

Santoyo argues thus, in agreement with Hokenson and Munson ('single text in two languages'), for 'one textual entity' that cannot be partitioned into 'original' and 'translation' as the text has been written by the same hand within a single, bilingual but monolithic reality.

I can conclude therefore, that two texts produced by the same author simultaneously in two different languages clearly have the innate potential to abolish the dichotomy of original – translation. My focus, in this study, therefore, is on the nature of texts produced consecutively

1.6.3 The target reader

The Italian translation scholar Simona Cocco argues that 'the self-translator seems to be modifying the original for their new audience' (2009: 110)⁶ and it is of interest to see what changes other than the linguistic code the author implements.

In the words of the Spanish translation scholar Castillo García, 'the content of a message is changed to make it somehow fit the culture of the reader [...] a new information is introduced that was not linguistically implicit in the original' (2006: 100).⁷ Castillo García notices how the content of the message changes to conform to the recipients' worldview. She does not view self-translation, therefore, in terms of language equivalence but in terms of its communicative function.

Hokenson and Munson argue that many authors translate and alter their own work in the process, because they want to address a new target audience. This new audience features a common language as well as a cultural, historical and political background (2006/14: 206). Such an audience could also be made of speakers of the same language but with somewhat different cultural backgrounds as in the case of English speakers from Britain, South Africa, Texas or New Zealand, or Portuguese speakers from Portugal, Brazil or Angola. The self-translator not only modifies the original, but they can also amplify ('new information' in García) their initial message.

Two important elements are at play in this instance. The first, since we are discussing consecutive self-translations, is the temporal one. The psychological, emotional and intellectual profile of people and indeed authors is subject to change as well as the cultural and political

⁶ 'L'autotraduttore, dunque, pare modificare l'originale in funzione del suo nuovo pubblico'.

⁷ 'se cambia el contenido de un mensaje para acomodarlo de algún modo a la cultura del receptor [...] se introduce una información que no está lingüísticamente implícita en el original'.

context they operate within. A passage of time between writing the first and second text can, therefore, influence the writing process and bring about modifications and/or amplifications. The second important element is the need to address a new target audience. This new audience is often the native language/culture of the self-translator (two of the three writers in this study self-translated in this direction). In such a case, the act of reproducing the text (and the 'self') in this language and for this specific, 'home' audience can carry a strong emotional charge that was not necessarily present during the writing of the first text.

An important feature of such a 'new target audience' is what the reception theorist Hans-Robert Jauss describes as a 'horizon of expectation'. Such a 'horizon' assumes the existence of a mental set within which people of a specific generation, language and/or culture understand, interpret, and evaluate a text and must be taken into consideration when addressing an audience:

A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. (Jauss 1982: 23)

Jauss views the literary work as fully immersed in the cultural context. For such a work to establish 'communication' with an audience, it needs to consider the audience's salient characteristics. Jauss stresses the role of reception and develops the idea that the text, this 'unit of significance' according to Rifaterre (1978), assumes meaning only by interacting with the reader. The reader is, therefore, the communicative target of the act of text production. The self-translator switches to a different language, creates a new 'version' of the text to address this specific new target-audience.

The translation scholar Lawrence Venuti uses the term 'domestication' to describe 'an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to the target language cultural values, [which] brings the author back home' (1995: 20). Venuti's 'domestication' is comparable to what Lefevere calls 'refraction,' the 'adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience,' produced 'with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work' (Lefevere 1982: 205). This process requires major cultural adaptations, and the comparative literature and translation studies scholar Valerie Henitiuk asserts that 'refraction involves the turning or bending of something as it passes from one medium into another, the term normally being used of light or sound waves, which become oblique as they encounter the boundary between media

of different densities (2012: 3). The text itself undergoes a transformation akin to those that take place in the physical world under the influence of the laws of nature. ‘Refraction’, therefore, views the cultural context as having an impact as determinative as that of the force of gravity (e.g.). Even if one is not aware of it, the force is still there.

As an example of ‘refraction,’ Lefevere uses the translation of Anne Frank’s *Diary*. The *Diary* was originally written in Dutch and the French, English and German translations were a direct result of ideological manipulation (Lefevere 1992: 59-72). Especially so the German translation as it eliminates whole sections of Frank’s account of the brutal treatment of the Jews. Lefevere views this translation as a clear example of a text being re-written to make it compatible with the dominant public discourse (at the time) engaged in portraying Germany as a country fighting its way out of the Nazi past. The divergence between the two texts (Frank’s and the translation) is well beyond the linguistic sphere and explicable only with the help of historical and political (cultural, broadly speaking) tools.

It must be said that Venuti and Lefevere write in relation to translations in general while Henitiuk is focused on self-translation. Nonetheless, all three describe a process of deliberate reformulation of the text to make it conform to the value system of the target language and culture and the horizon of expectation of the target readership.

It follows that it is easy to see how a translator would ‘domesticate’ a text to suite the ideological or marketing needs of a publisher or a target readership. A language, however, ‘expresses... a certain mental model of human relations’ (Nescolarde-Selva, Usó -Doménech and Gash 2017: 2) and while the author of the first text and translator can belong to different linguistic, cultural and, indeed, ideological matrices, it is unclear how a self-translator, a single person would do so without challenging her (in our case) intellectual integrity.

1.6.4 The Original

Hokenson and Munson argue that self-translators not only bridge the gap between cultures but also combine them into a single subject creating thus a new reality (2006/14). They also posit that self-translation can be viewed as an extension of creative writing and, since the process combines two languages/cultures into one, it also produces the reality of a ‘single text in two languages’ (Hokenson & Munson 2006/2014: 1). It follows that the self-translator, their cultural

construct ('new reality') and their bilingual 'single text' should therefore be regarded as monolithic 'originals'. In the case of self-translation, Hokenson and Munson erase the distinction between the source and the target text and view them as a single, continuous entity.

The translation and comparative literature scholar Rosemary Arrojo maintains that 'translation has been conquering a more defined space within language and cultural studies since the 1980s,' and that such a conquest 'seems to be closely related to the dissemination of postmodern conceptions of meaning which have (...) undermined the notion of the original as a stable, objectively transferable entity...'. (Arrojo 1998: 25)

According to Arrojo, therefore, the very notion of the 'original' is brought into question from both the philosophical and translation theory point of view. In translation, we are not dealing with an 'objectively transferable entity' for there is no such a thing as objective transfer. As mentioned before, every 'transfer' or re-writing, in the terminology of Lefevere and Bassnett, is conditioned by specific socio-political and physiological circumstances which undermine any possible claim of 'objectivity'.

Furthermore, Bassnett argues that the work of the Canadian self-translating author Nancy Huston 'implies that there is neither an original nor a translation, rather there are two versions of a piece of writing in two languages, each with its own set of significations' (Bassnett 2013: 15). Bassnett also notices that the very notion of 'self-translation' calls for revisiting the problem of the existence of an original (Ibid.).

Self-translations, therefore, hold the potential to challenge the status of the original. This does not mean that every self-translation necessarily does so but rather that self-translations can be empowered to do so and thus open a range of new possibilities for the understanding of the text(s) and its 'cultural network'. It is indeed one of the aims of the present study to explore ways in which such a potential has been harnessed in the works of Ferré, Duranti, Goldsworthy and Radić.

Chapter 2: Rosario Ferré

2.1. Background information

Rosario Ferré Ramírez de Arellano (1938 – 2016) was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico. She studied English at school and began to write and publish at the age of fourteen when she became a contributor to the newspaper *El Nuevo Día*. After completing her secondary school education, she moved to the United States where she studied at Manhattanville College in New York and obtained a BA degree in English and French. In the seventies, she returned to Puerto Rico where she obtained a master's degree in Latin American studies from the University of Puerto Rico. During this period, she founded the journal *Zona de Carga y Descarga* and subsequently a biography of her father, a prominent Puerto Rican politician. She also wrote a column for the daily *El Mundo* (all in Spanish). She then completed a PhD (University of Maryland, USA) with a thesis on the Argentine author Julio Cortázar: *The romantic affiliation of the stories of Julio Cortázar*. Ferré worked as university professor at the University of Puerto Rico and published works in a Puerto Rican daily in English. She was visiting professor at American universities and is today regarded as one of the most influential Puerto Rican writers (Stark 2005).

Rosario Ferré wrote fiction in both Spanish and English, often self-translating her work into the other language. She wrote the novella *Maldito amor* in Spanish (1986) followed by the English version entitled *Sweet Diamond Dust* (1988). She then wrote *House on the Lagoon* in English (1995) and followed it up with the Spanish version, *Casa de la laguna* (1996).

As a bilingual and bi-cultural author and scholar, Ferré feels at ease writing in both languages and in her own words (Ferré 1992: 70): ‘a writer who lived the culture and the moral values embedded in the matrix of more than one language can be called bilingual’.⁸ The author

⁸ ‘Un escritor que ha vivido la cultura y los valores morales empotrados en la matriz de más de un lenguaje específico puede decirse que es un escritor bilingüe’.

defines bilingualism as the condition of being ‘embedded’ in multiple matrices, stressing the importance of the cultural and historical context (‘matrix’). Such a bilingual and bicultural disposition enables her to ‘develop an in-depth understanding of both the North American and Latin American cultures’ (*ibid.*) and comes to represent the hallmark of her literary oeuvre.

2.2. The socio-political, cultural and linguistic context

The Caribbean island of Puerto Rico has been for centuries a colony of Spain and subsequently of the United States. With both colonisers, the Spanish speaking country developed very complex economic, political and cultural relationships that are mirrored in the identity of its people (Morris 1995: 1).

Rosario Ferré writes extensively on the identity of her people and the often-uneasy relationship with the dominant Northern American neighbour. She asserts that:

To be Puerto Rican is to be a hybrid. Our two halves are inseparable; we cannot give up either without feeling maimed. For many years, my concern was to keep my Hispanic self from being stifled. Now I discover it’s my American self, that’s being threatened. (Ferré 1998)

This sometimes uneasy coexistence of two major cultures and languages shapes a new, specific identity. A group of New York-based conceptual artists developed an online project entitled *El Puerto Rican Embassy*. The project is based on the notion of an ‘out of focus identity’ — an identity that is not clearly defined, and produces texts typified by extensive (same sentence) language switching:

Maybe nosotros no somos los que estamos fuera de foco maybe is the signs that we are receiving. Las direcciones de los centros of power, that’s what’s out of focus. (Blanco 2011)

This Project aims at deconstructing the formal linguistic properties of both languages combining them into a *sui generis* Puerto Rican Spanglish that is more representative, according to the authors, of an ‘out of focus’ identity.

While the *El Puerto Rican Embassy* project hovers playfully over the linguistic surface of the cultural and political reality of the Island and its people, Ferré articulates this multi-layered nature with literary means. The literary scholar Ana Molestina suggests that Ferré tells the history of Puerto Rico ‘so that she can reflect on notions of reality’ (2015: 112).⁹ Molestina maintains that any approach to the work of Ferré with special reference to *The House on the Lagoon* is conditioned upon a thorough contextualization, and that the vital keys for the understanding of Ferré’s work, inclusive of self-translations, are to be found within this cultural and political context.

2.3. *The House on the Lagoon / La casa de la laguna*

The House on the Lagoon was published in the United States in 1995 and was a finalist in the National Book Award (*New York Times* 2016) earning Ferré critical acclaim as (among other things) the first Puerto Rican or Latina writer to do so. *La casa de la laguna* was published immediately after, in 1996.

The novel tells the story of Isabel Monfort, a Puerto Rican from Ponce. Isabel writes about the histories of her own family and the family of her husband, Quintín Mendizabal. Early in the novel, Ferré provides us with their detailed family tree. The narrative moves quickly among a forest of names and dates that Ferré uses in her representation of the history of 20th century Puerto Rico. The novel begins on July 4th, 1917, the very day President Wilson signed the act granting Puerto Ricans American citizenship.

The novel covers an extended period of time and entertains the question of the nature of truth as well as the social conflicts such as Puerto Rico’s independence debate. Via a series of interconnected episodes featuring various branches of Isabel and Quintín’s families, the narrative illustrates the tensions between races and social classes.

Ferré states in an interview with the comparative literature scholar Walescka Pino-Ojeda that ‘a work of art is everything... everything is identified and inseparable’¹⁰ (Pino-Ojeda 2000: 124). Ferré’s self-translation of *The House on the Lagoon* is part of the same

⁹ ‘Para reflexionar sobre nociones de realidad’.

¹⁰ (‘[l]a obra de arte es todo, . . . todo está identificado y es inseparable.’)

literary project that addresses two different audiences, but it originates from one and the same source: the bi-lingual and bi-cultural creative writer.

2.4. How does Ferré see her own practice of self-translation?

Ferré articulates the nature of her self-translation activity as follows:

Translating one's own literary work is, in short, a complex, disturbing occupation. It can be diabolic and obsessive: it is one of the few instances when one can be dishonest and feel good about it, rather like having a second chance at redressing one's fatal mistakes in life and living a different way. The writer becomes her own critical conscience; her superego leads her (perhaps treacherously) to believe that she can not only better but also surpass herself, or at least surpass the writer she has been in the past. Popular lore has long equated translation with betrayal. . . . But in translating one's own work it is only by betraying that one can better the original.
(Ferré, 1990: 74)

The author views self-translation as a form of transgression that brings to the writer 'a feeling of euphoria as if they were immersing themselves into sin without having to bear the consequences for such an act' (Ferré 1990: 79).¹¹ She also refers to the practice of self-translation as 'disturbing,' 'diabolical,' 'obsessive,' 'dishonest,' and writes about committing 'fatal mistakes,' 'sins' and engaging in 'betrayal'. Self-translation seems to be to her a clandestine and subversive activity that challenges the monolithic, monolingual Puerto Rican identity.

Ferré maintains that 'in translating one's own work it is only by betraying that one can better the original' (Ferré 1990: 74). The 'original' can be bettered and its authority challenged but this can only be achieved by 'betraying' the rules, by 'transgressing.' Ferré acknowledges thus the possibility that an 'original' can be bettered and concurs with the previously discussed assertion of Wilson that self-translations 'open new possibilities for the original.' Such a new possibility in her case, is the coexistence of two identities, the Puerto Rican and the American one as well as of two languages, Spanish and English. Something that, for a long time, she felt

¹¹ 'Un sentimiento de euforia en el escritor, que se siente como si estuviera hundiendo en el pecado, sin tener que pagar las consecuencias.'

was transgressive because situated ‘beyond’ the strict norms of her social environment(s), languages and literatures.

Bassnett and Lefevere suggest that ‘translation nears the edge of the impossible’ and that the act of translation is *per se* an activity that makes one venture ‘beyond’ the linguistic, cultural frontier and in proximity of the ‘impossible’ (1990: 5). Such an adventure is described by Ferré as a ‘betrayal’ (of the rules) and a ‘transgression’. The author and the critics agree that the very nature of translation (Bassnett and Lefevere) and self-translation (Ferré) challenges customary rules and practices and that such a procedure is closely linked to acts of trespass and misconduct.

The literary scholar Jenni Ramone amplifies this idea and asserts that ‘rather than translation being impossible, translation without transgression is impossible’ (Ramone 2013: 165). According to Ramone therefore, transgression is a prerequisite of translation. When confined to a single, self-translating individual, Ramone suggests, such a transgressive practice can indeed appear to be ‘disturbing,’ ‘diabolical,’ ‘obsessive,’ ‘dishonest’ and/or ‘sinful’ as described by Ferré.

In the interview with the literary scholar Donna Perry, Ferré acknowledges that she changes ‘details’ in the second version of the text and states that:

Yes, it has to do with that. It has to do with the changes in the mind perhaps, and with changes in feeling. Language has a lot to do with feeling, and you can’t talk about certain things the same way, when you talk in a different language. Also, you’re writing for a different audience. (Perry 1993: 101)

Ferré affirms that her self-translations not only take into consideration the existing text, but as the author, she wants to continue to express herself creatively in the second text. By doing so, she brings into play the temporal dimension, as the lapse of time between the writing of the two versions is fraught with intellectual and emotional content. She also makes explicit reference to the ‘different audience’ that features a new horizon of expectations and the need to establish communication with it.

Ferré asserts that one cannot talk (write) the same way in another language as if ‘writing the same way’ were a duty or indeed, a possibility. This, since we can challenge, of course, the very possibility of producing (writing or saying) something the ‘same way’ in the same

language provided there is a passage of time between the two versions. It follows that for Ferré, *not* writing the ‘same way’ is a form of transgression.

The motivation to self-translate her own work, in Ferré, appears to be threefold: To reach America-based Puerto Rican compatriots who don’t read Spanish, to reach out to the English-speaking reader and market, as well as to follow the creative impulse and continue to write her work.

As for the first motive, to reach America-based Puerto Rican compatriots who do not read Spanish, Ferré’s political activism and strong views are well documented:

One of the reasons why Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré translates her work into English is that it will reach her compatriots who have come to the United States and lost their language and, hence, their contact with their homeland [...]. (Barak 1998: 31)

The Puerto Rican hybrid identity is a constant thread in Ferré’s work. Being bilingual is an essential part of it and Ferré views her work as a significant opportunity to unite her people across the language barrier. To refer to the literary scholar Julie Barak’s questions mentioned earlier in this chapter, Ferré’s self-translation practice aims at establishing bridges between the two cultures, languages and give a sense of identity to people who find themselves in the ‘zone of authentication,’ in the terminology of the Puerto Rican literary scholar Juan Flores (2010: 152). Flores uses this expression to denote the ‘no man’s land’ between the countries and also the state of permanent back and forth commuting.

We have no indications, however, that Ferré intended her bilingual texts to produce a ‘stereo effect’ as per Epstein’s assertion. Ferré wrote with two distinct target audiences in mind and did not expect her bilingual readers to access both versions of the text. Self-translation seems to have enabled Ferré to fully develop her bicultural personality and given her a sense of belonging and citizenship that her two communities on their own have failed to do.

The second motive is to reach out to the English-speaking audience and market. Negrón-Muntaner (2012: 168) reports that Ferré states in an interview that:

My (Ferré’s) last two books were first published in English for practical reasons, because they could then be launched in the international market. If they had been published as translations from (or to) English, then they would not have received

the same reviews, and they would not have appeared in the media. (Negrón-Muntaner 2012: 168)

Ferré is well aware of the presence and the power of marketing forces. The motive behind the decision to give precedence to the English version might be of a mundane, practical nature as the English book market is the largest in the world.

The Spanish literary scholar Castillo García notes that Rosario Ferré repeatedly confessed that the decision to translate her own work into English as well as to write in English first followed the practical rationale of introducing her work to as vast an audience as possible (2006). Barak notices that ‘The other audience she [Ferré] reaches with her translations is, of course, all those citizens of the U.S. who read only in English. Her work serves to raise their consciousness of and educate them about their political cousins in Puerto Rico’ (1998: 31). Ferré’s decision to write her novel in English first followed therefore a practical, communicative trajectory that cannot be completely dissociated from marketing considerations.

A further motive of Ferré to self-translate is the creative drive. The Hispanic studies scholar Marlene Esplin notes that:

The semantic and ideological differences between her works evidence how she engages, if not embraces, a poetics of contradiction as an author and translator. As she rewrites, she does not carry over markers of punctuation, paragraphing, or even basic indicators of chronology; she occasions several substantive, or what G. Thomas Tanselle describes as ‘vertical,’ revisions of her text.¹² (Esplin 2015: 24)

Esplin describes Ferré’s literary practice as contradictory. A ‘poetics of contradiction’ however, as per Esplin’s characterisation, can still be coherent. The fact that we might lack critical literary tools to deal with a literary technique such as self-translation speaks volumes about the scholarly approach but says nothing about the poetics in question.

¹² The American textual critic and scholar G. Thomas Tanselle (1979: 335) calls vertical a revision of the text that ‘aims at altering the purpose, direction, or character of a work, thus attempting to make a different sort of work out of it’. Ferré rewrites often without carrying over markers of punctuation, paragraphing, or even basic indicators of chronology. Furthermore and more importantly, she occasions substantive revisions of the text and that is what G. Thomas Tanselle describes as “vertical” revisions of her text.

Near the end of the English version, in the chapter entitled ‘When the Shades Draw near,’ Isabel makes an analogy with fish in the sea to describe ‘the eternal struggle’ where you ‘eat and escape being eaten’ (*The House* 380). The Spanish text, however, asserts that ‘el pez más fuerte siempre se come al más pequeño’ (*La casa* 402). Given that our narrator, Isabel in the very moment of this reflection, observes the work of fishermen in an Atlantic Ocean port, her Spanish pronouncement is certainly more articulate and contextualised (Castillo García 2013: 269). The rather abstract, metaphysical English assertion is rendered with a simple, almost palpable statement about the reality of our physical world.

Willie Mendizábal tells Isabel that ‘every time we wet our feet or wade into the sea, we touch other people, we share their sadness and their joys. Because we live on an island, there is no mass of mountains, no solid dike of matter to keep us from flowing out to the others.’ (*The House* 389). Since they are on an island, there are no mountains around them and no natural barriers that would keep different peoples apart. The sea, therefore, brings people in contact, quite like translations, we could add. Translations that make it possible for us to ‘wet our feet [...] in the sea’ and to ‘touch other people.’ The Spanish text, however, is more concrete and the metaphor of living on an island is rendered as ‘cuando se vive al borde del agua’ (*La casa* 411) – ‘when we live at the edge of the water.’ What in the English version was implied, here, in the second, Spanish version is rather more explicit as ‘*agua*’ (‘water’) is named and makes the metaphor more precise. If one lives in Cambridge, England they live on an Island but given Britain’s size, that city cannot be said to be near the sea (water). Living at the edge of the water, on the other hand, gives this analogy a more straightforward and readily available meaning. Translations bring people in contact, quite like the water does, and finding oneself in the proximity of the edge of the water is of importance. The Spanish version, therefore, appears to be more polished as it drives this idea with more precision and clarity.

It is not possible, however, to claim that the Spanish version of the text is different because it is in a different language. It might be different because of the temporal hiatus between the two versions. Had Ferré re-wrote the novel in English a year later the same alterations might have taken place. We have no way of knowing. On the other hand, it is not likely that a literary translator (not a self-translator) would make such changes. We can, therefore, understand these two instances as a prime example of re-writing, as opposed to creative writing and translation.

Esplin agrees that Ferré continues to express herself creatively while revisiting her text and that she communicates with the reader using the interplay between the texts. Ferré ‘marks for the reader how she herself may have changed in relation to her source text and her target text, the text that she rewrites’ (Esplin 2015: 26). Esplin also signals the presence of a ‘no man’s land,’ of a ‘zone of authentication’ (Flores) between the two Ferré texts.

In the English version of the novel, Isabel ponders how ‘things change, the world goes around, marriages and love affairs are made and unmade’ (*The House* 311) while in the Spanish version the same character asserts that ‘el mundo da vueltas, la gente cambia, los matrimonios se hacen y se deshacen,’¹³ adding though, that ‘La persona que escribe la última oración de una página no es la misma que escribió la primera’ (*La casa* 332), or, that ‘the person who writes the last sentence of the page is not the same who had written the first.’ Indeed, the passage of time is the dimension that stands between the author and the self-translator. This temporal dimension is filled with emotional charge and intellectual activity that inform further writing.

Ferré has Isobel ask (*The House* 331) wasn’t all storytelling, in a sense, like that? (...) Each chapter is like a letter to the reader; its meaning isn’t completed until it is read by someone.’ (¿No es ésa le naturaleza misma de la escritura? (...) Cada pliego es una carta dirigida al lector; su significado no estará completo hasta que alguien lo lea.) (*La casa* 332). Ferré agrees, therefore, with the main points raised by Jauss’ reception theory that situates the meaning of the text somewhere between the reader and the text. The theory also implies that each person interprets the text differently depending on their background, motivation and the context of the reading itself.

The house on the Puerto Rican lagoon would be completely different from the European masterpiece built by Wright as it would be set in a completely different geographical and historical context. The Czech architect, Pavel (a character in the novel) ‘was stunned; he couldn’t understand how anyone could say such a thing. His church would have been a faithful re-creation stone by stone, of Wright’s masterpiece, not a mere copy’ (*The House*, 41). (Pavel lo miró sorprendido; no podía comprender cómo podía hacer una denuncia semejante. Su

¹³ This is a fairly accurate translation of the English.

‘Un escritor que ha vivido la cultura y los valores morales empotrados en la matriz de más de un lenguaje específico puede decirse que es un escritor bilingüe’.

iglesia era una recreación fiel, piedra por piedra, de la obra del maestro, y no una vil copia. Era su manera de rendirle el homenaje máximo' (*La Casa* 55).

The two versions differ in several details, but most importantly, the first, English text refers to the building of the 'church' as a future event ('would have been') while the second, Spanish text looks back at the act of building deploying the imperfective form of the verb to be – 'era'. This leaves the potential bilingual writer with a dilemma: was this 'church' built in between the writing of the first and second text?

The house on the lagoon would be completely different from the European masterpiece as it would be set in a different geographical and historical context. At a literary level, Ferré appears to be writing an homage to Jorge Luis Borges and his 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote'. In this short story, Borges explains with elegant wit and irony that even if the translation were identical to the original, it would be read in a different time, by different readers, and in a different socio-political and cultural context. It would, therefore, elicit a different reaction and produce a different impact (Borges 1939).

2.5. In this context, what is an original?

When Ferré began to work on the Spanish text, *The House on the Lagoon* had already been published. This text was 'closed' and the author focused her creative energy on re-writing the Spanish version.

In *La casa de la laguna*, Quintín finds the original plans of the house. The English text concludes that 'one of them was the plan of the house on the lagoon' (p. 299) while the Spanish version adds the following details: 'Una de ellas era exactamente igual a la casa de la laguna, tal y como él la recordaba en su niñez' (p. 320). The Spanish text tells us therefore that:

- a) the plan was not *of* the house on the lagoon, but it was 'exactly the same' ('exactamente igual') *as* the house on the lagoon;
- b) the house was as he remembered it in his childhood (never mentioned in English).

These alterations are meaningful. In the second, Spanish text Ferré asserts the relevance of the temporal and spatial dimensions. The temporal dimension allows Quintín to distance

himself from his present — the Spanish text he finds himself in, and to explicitly look back at his past, his childhood – the English text.¹⁴

The spatial dimension allows for the house on the lagoon to be ‘exactly the same’ which is to say, not the same but as close as it gets to it. The Spanish text, therefore, is ‘exactly the same’ as the English one – which is, obviously, not true as this very assertion does not feature in the first text. Ferré therefore acknowledges the ‘distance’ between the two texts and asserts their idiosyncratic nature.

Set in the cultural, historical and now Spanish language context of Puerto Rico, the house on the lagoon interacts with the environment and elicits aesthetic pleasure and admiration (from Quintín) – quite as does Ferré’s novel. By continuing to be responsive (horizon of expectation) and by re-writing her text, Ferré re-proposes the text to a new target audience. There are no indications that Ferré wished to undermine in any way the authority of the first, English text – an act that, in her own words, would be perceived as sin. Her re-writing takes place due to her creative drive. As a politically, culturally and socially engaged author, Ferré engages with the new readership in order to articulate and communicate in her mother tongue her deepest thoughts and sentiments.

Ferré sees both the Spanish and the English versions as ‘original’ (Negrón-Muntaner 2012: 168). In asserting this, Ferré uses the singular form of the noun ‘original’ to make it clear that both novels, both languages, both cultures to Ferré are one – an essential part of her undivided, multi-layered Puerto Rican identity.

The inner covers of the *Casa de la laguna* state that ‘this book was first published in English under the title *The House on the Lagoon*.’ (‘Este libro fue publicado por primera vez en inglés bajo el título *The House on the Lagoon*.’) For the publishers therefore, the fact that *The House* and *La casa* are one and the same ‘book’ is beyond dispute. A publisher might also have legal and other operational reasons for treating the product of self-translation like any other translation. For instance, if a novel is well read or won a prize, they have very good marketing reasons to associate the self-translated text with the ‘original’. It is also questionable whether the readership would accept the second novel as ‘not’ a translation but a rewriting of the first text.

¹⁴ The reference to childhood memories does not feature in the first, English text. When we compare these passages, therefore, we have the sense that the first text could be the ‘past’ and the second text the ‘present.’

Scholars such as Barchino Pérez (1999: 205) and Acosta-Belén (1996: 31) agree that Rosario Ferré re-wrote rather than translated her creative work into another language. Castillo García concludes that there is a consensus among critics that Ferré's translations are re-writings and she further asserts that:

By omitting certain words, by substituting some expressions or by expanding the historical and cultural information, the author 'domesticates' the original texts, making them suitable for readers who at the receiving end of such translations. Such a 'manipulation' is certainly legitimate in two important ways: Because of Ferré's bilingualism and bi-culturalism and because she is the author of both the translation and the original work. As a translator of her own works, she is a privileged reader, but she also takes some liberties in changing her texts with the aim of adapting them to the cultural context of the readership at the receiving end.¹⁵ (Castillo García 2013)

Castillo García uses the term 'to domesticate' in the sense of Venuti, as per our previous discussion, as an adaptation of the first text to the target audience, its language and cultural values. Furthermore, she describes Ferré as a 'privileged', therefore, not 'ordinary', translator that changes, modifies and amplifies the first text.

Esplin uses the term 'perpetuation' to refer to Ferré's self-translation practice while she reserves the term 'creation' for the writing of the first text (Esplin 2012: 88). She accepts that Ferré's 'translations result in two undeniably authoritative versions of a text whose equal claims to authority unsettle fixed notions of both texts and of Ferré as their author.' Esplin asserts that the second version of Ferré's text is not a 'creation' on a par with the first text but she also maintains that it is not a translation either. In her own words, it is a 'perpetuation' – a re-writing of the first text. The two versions are 'authoritative' and Ferré is their author. According to Esplin therefore, the dichotomy original – translation is unhelpful (she does not use the terms) and the two versions of Ferré's text represent a move away from both the literary (original) and translation studies (translation) view on self-translation.

¹⁵ 'Mediante la omisión de ciertas palabras, la sustitución de determinadas expresiones o la ampliación de información histórica y cultural, la autora "domestica" los textos originales, acomodándolos a los lectores que van a recibir estas traducciones. Dicha "manipulación" es ciertamente legítima en dos sentidos: por el bilingüismo y biculturalidad de Ferré y por ser esta la autora tanto de la traducción como de la obra original. Como autotraductora de sus obras, no sólo se convierte en una lectora privilegiada, sino que también se permite ciertas licencias a la hora de modificar sus textos con la intención de adaptarlos al contexto cultural del público que lo recibirá'. (Castillo García, 2013: 290)

Ferré herself, as well as several scholars (Esplin 2015, Castillo García 2013, Barchino Pérez 1999, Acosta-Belén 1996), expresses the view that the author continued to re-write rather than attempting to ‘translate’ her work.¹⁶ There is also broad agreement that she has put forward the case for her ‘self-translated’ texts to be considered as originals in their own right. While we have no indications that Ferré ever considered creating a ‘stereo’ effect for the benefit of her bilingual readers, she did consider the cultural ‘matrix’ of her two audiences as she seems to have created a single, bilingual text that faces different horizons.

¹⁶ A clear example of an author’s self-translation practice aimed at ‘translating’ rather than ‘re-writing’ is the case of Vesna Goldsworthy. This will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3: Francesca Duranti

3.1. Background information

Francesca Duranti was born in 1935 in a wealthy Tuscan (Italy) family that placed great importance on their children's foreign languages education. She began writing as a teenager and in her own words 'I would paint a bit, write a bit. I had a kind of non-differentiated creative impulse that later, when I was twenty perhaps, settled on writing'¹⁷ (Wood 1992: 189). The young Francesca Duranti felt the need thus to express herself using creative, artistic means and that ultimately found its articulation in the form of translation, writing and self-translation.

Duranti is an established literary translator from French, German and English into Italian. She published her first novel, *La Bambina* in 1976 when she was forty This was followed by *Piazza mia bella piazza* (1978), the critically acclaimed *La casa sul lago della luna* (1984), *Lieto fine* (1987), *Effetti personali* (1988), *Ultima stesura* (1991), *Progetto Burlamacchi* (1994), *Sogni mancini* (1996) self-translated by Duranti into English as *Left-Handed Dreams* (2000), *Il comune senso delle proporzioni* (2000), *L'ultimo viaggio della Canaria* (2003), *Come quando fuori piove* (2006), *Un anno senza canzoni*, *Manuale di conversazione. Né rissa né noia* (2009) and *Il diavolo alle calcagna* (2011) (Spunta 1999).

Duranti's creative work received many Italian and international awards and was translated into eighteen languages (Marsilio 2008). Since 1994, she has divided her time between the village of Gattaiola in Tuscany and New York (Kozma 1996: 177, *Officina Letteraria* 2014).

¹⁷ 'Dipingevo un po', scrivevo un po', avevo come una specie di creativita indifferenziata, che poi si è piu stabilizzata sullo scrivere, quando avevo mettiamo vent' anni...'

3.2 The socio-political, cultural and linguistic context

The Italian linguistic landscape is characterized by the co-existence of the standard Italian language, the official language of the country, and several regional dialects, many of which are not mutually intelligible (Loporcaro 2009). Since the Italian language derives directly from the Tuscan vernacular, Duranti uses standard Italian.

Duranti's family took particular care of their children's linguistic upbringing and from a very early age Francesca was taught German, English and French. At some point in her youth, she even considered herself bilingual in Italian and German (Duranti 2014).

The translation studies scholar Elena Spagnuolo suggests that Duranti lost interest in the German language because she felt that the language lessons denied her access to her mother: 'This separation from the mother acquires a double meaning, as the mother can be perceived not only in the physical sense of *person who gives you birth*, but also in the linguistic sense of *native language*' (Spagnuolo 2017: 70). 'Mother' can also be a metaphor for origin, place of birth and for the belonging to a specific culture and language. In the words of Spagnuolo Duranti thus felt that the foreign language (German) stood in the way of her being able to fully embrace her own, Italian language and tradition.

In 1994 Duranti moved for part of the time to New York and such an arrangement placed her in a bi-cultural and bi-linguistic situation between Italian and English, between the gentle hills of the Tuscan countryside and the geometrically challenging Manhattan skyscrapers. When asked if she feels bi-cultural, Duranti replies that she feels more than anything else schizophrenic, and that 'the Italian lack of discipline, the annoying German moralizing, the Anglo-Saxon pragmatism, the French snobbism,' are all shortcomings that she recognises in herself (Duranti 2014). Duranti affirms therefore, rather than her bicultural disposition, a view of her own identity as pluri-polar, pertaining to more than two linguistic and cultural spheres.

In literary terms though, since Duranti writes in Italian the geographical, cultural and linguistic contrast between the two locations, Tuscany and New York sets the preconditions for her self-translation practice to take place between the Italian and English languages.

By living in New York, Duranti adopts the English language and like many other

migrants becomes a ‘translated being’ (Malena 2003: 9). She adopts both the new country and the new language. The translation studies scholar Loredana Polezzi asserts that such ‘translated’ people, if we consider it from the vantage point of translation, show us clearly that it is not only texts that travel, from one language and culture to the other, but also people and hence the term ‘translated’ being (Polezzi 2012: 347).

As per Polezzi’s assertion, Duranti did not engage in the practice of self-translation before coming to New York, before being ‘translated’ herself. It was this move and her bi-cultural and bi-lingual situation that created the conditions for self-translation to take place.

The Irish translation studies scholar Michael Cronin identifies two strategies that immigrants adopt in respect to translation: they either assimilate seeking to ‘translate,’ re-cast themselves into the shape and form of the dominant language and culture, or they opt for an accommodation, using translation as a means of maintaining their languages of origin (Cronin 2006: 52). Duranti fits well in the latter category as in her self-translation practice she tries to modify and amplify certain traits of the first text seeking ‘accommodation,’ to use Cronin’s terminology. She is an Italian in America and will not renounce her ‘first’ identity in order to unconditionally ‘accept’ the second.

At the time of her move to America (1994), Duranti was in her late fifties,¹⁸ a proficient user of English and a literary translator from this language (among others). The full immersion in the American culture and the full adoption of the new language is a challenging experience that she decides to articulate through her bilingual writing practice and self-translation.

3.3 *Sogni mancini / Left-Handed Dreams*

Duranti’s close friend, collaborator and editor, Nicoletta di Ciolla McGowan asserts that *Sogni mancini/Left-Handed Dreams*, the only work that Duranti self-translated, ‘has been conceived of and developed simultaneously in both Italian and English’ (McGowan 2000: v). The English version underwent a more laborious process of evolution and several revisions (McGowan 2000: vi). Given that *Sogni mancini* was published in 1996 and the English

¹⁸ Born 2 January 1935.

version four years later, the intensity of this ‘evolution’ process and the extent of the revisions are possibly extensive.

The main character of the novel is Martina Satriano, the author’s alter ego (Spunta 2000, Wilson 2009, Spagnuolo 2017). Martina is in her forties, from Tuscany. She teaches at a New York University and lives in a Manhattan apartment. She is divorced, without children and devotes her time to work, fitness routines, occasional love affairs, and morning games of bridge, while indulging in culinary escapades. McGowan asserts that one of the central themes of the novel is ‘the notion(s) of diversity and the acceptance of diversity in the name of tolerance’ (McGowan 2000: ix). Martina learns how to live with multi-ethnic and multi-cultural diversity as well as her own ‘otherness’ (McGowan 2000: ix). This sense of estrangement grows from the realisation (perhaps wrong) that as a naturally left-handed child, she was forced to switch to the right hand. Here again, we recognise the same pattern as in Duranti’s childhood experience with the German language lessons. Duranti perceives, at an emotional level, that the process of socialisation is ‘unnatural’ and that it challenges perhaps her true ‘self’. Preserving this ‘self’ as the cornerstone of an individual’s identity has always been important to her.

The novel features a minor character, Jerry who is described by Martina as ‘the most monolithic figure I know’ (Duranti 2000: 64). He is a translator, and Wilson asserts that his role in the novel is to ‘validate(s) the notion that language is the basic building block of reality: words give us our sense of “I,” words are the tools with which we relate, narrate, tell stories, create memories, forge models of identity’ (Wilson 2009: 194). If so, Duranti’s Italian and English ‘realities’ are separate entities and her own, ontological ‘I’ is to be redefined and articulated through the means of a new linguistic paradigm and/or literary device – self-translation.

A previous Duranti novel, *La casa sul lago della luna* (1984) features another translator, Fabrizio Garrone who is asked to write the biography of an obscure Austrian writer, Fritz Oberhofer. Since information about Oberhofer is scarce, Garrone decides not to waste time and invents everything. He starts to gradually confuse reality with imagination and the italianist and translation studies scholar Sharon Wood observes that incoherence begins ‘at the point where translation becomes interpretation’ (Wood 1995: 353). Indeed, such an ‘incoherence’ manifests itself in the translator (Garrone) producing both the ‘source’ and

‘target’ texts quite like a self-translator with the caveat, of course, that Garrone does so in the name of the mysterious Austrian author.

In *Sogni mancini* we see a shift in focus from the untrustworthy, postmodern translator Garrone to the apparently monolithic, self-assured Jerry. What the two fictional translators have in common is the problematisation of the practice of ‘translation’ as an identity-defining intercultural mediation.

Sogni mancini opens with a journey by Martina Satriano from New York City to Italy. Her mother is on her deathbed and Martina would like to see her one last time. The first line of the Italian version informs us that ‘*mi hanno detto che è morta alle sette e mezza del mattino*’ (Duranti 1996: 9). The English text asserts that ‘they say she died at 7:30 in the morning’ (Duranti 2000: 3).

A comparative analysis of these two brief sentences shows some telling differences:

- a. In Italian, Martina states that ‘*mi hanno detto.*’

‘*Mi*’ is an unstressed direct object pronoun, and the equivalent English structure would be ‘they told me.’ (underlined by NR)

The English self-translation stands however as ‘they say.’

Duranti disposes of the direct object pronoun. So rather than translating the Italian ‘*mi hanno detto*’ as ‘they told me,’ she omits the pronoun altogether

- b. The Italian text in the past tense: ‘*hanno detto.*’

This is a *Passato prossimo* tense comparable in structure to the English Present Perfect (PP) and in usage encompasses both the PP and the Simple Past Tense. The English version, however, uses a Present Simple Tense ‘(they) say’ that gives to the enunciation a vague, less immediate quality.

These changes in the opening sentence of the English text represent a palpable shift. While the Italian text describes the events with absolute certainty and precision, the English text, thanks to these small but significant changes, introduces a degree of ambiguity. It is clear though, that the changes were intentional rather than a case of poor translation. Duranti is an experienced and highly skilled translator whose professional credentials are well established. It is not clear, however, if such a shift comes about due to a linguistic (English) or temporal (four years) distance or perhaps, some other eminently aesthetic consideration. By re-writing

this opening sentence, Duranti states clearly her intentions. *Left-Handed Dreams* is not to be a translation but a different novel as the author sets out to ‘re-write’ *Sogni mancini* from within the American linguistic and cultural code. McGowan asserts that ‘the changes, made on various occasions... were intended to make *Left-Handed Dreams* read less as a translation and more as an autonomous text, a novel in its own right’ (McGowan 2000: v). This assertion, she states (McGowan 2000: xviii), is based on her private correspondence with Duranti and as such must be taken as a clear statement of Duranti’s intention to write two ‘autonomous’ texts.

Every translation *is* a different text re-created within a given linguistic and cultural system. We can only speculate about the meaning of Duranti’s definition of an ‘autonomous text’ but we can infer that as an experienced translator and author, she wants to assert the authority of the English text as ‘autonomous,’ as a ‘source’ text (writing) as opposed to a derivative ‘target’ text (translation).

McGowan suggests that while Duranti took great care of the syntactic and lexical accuracy of her text, she also ‘availed herself of the cooperation of an American friend whose task was to ‘de-Italianise’ her English’ (McGowan 2000: xvii). McGowan further comments that Duranti insisted ‘that certain linguistic quirks, neologisms, words that she (or rather her protagonist) created on the model of the Italian lexicon, be kept, precisely to that effect’ (McGowan 2000: xviii). She states that this ‘being the story of an Italian woman in the USA... [it] would easily absorb a language with a vague ethnic reminiscence. A scent of basil so to speak’ (McGowan 2000: xviii). Based on this testimony from McGowan, we may infer that upon arrival in New York, Duranti assumes that she is able to ‘translate her being’ into the English language and the American culture while at the same time preserving typically Italian traits.

As a self-translator, Duranti aims at striking a delicate balance between ‘syntactic and lexical accuracy’ and native speaker’s fluency on the one hand, and the retention of traits of Italian linguistic and cultural identity on the other. One of the means she deploys to do so is keeping some Italian expressions despite their ‘dubious Englishness’ (McGowan 2000: xv). One such expression is the verb to ‘de-southern,’ *de-meridionalizzare* in Italian. While the Italian neologism is easily understood within the Italian linguistic and socio-historical context, it is completely lost on the American reader. *De-meridionalizzare* means to strip

oneself of traces of southern Italian language and culture. We could expand and note that if a Neapolitan or Sicilian (south) wanted to be accepted in Milanese or Venetian (north) society they would have to undergo a certain degree of *de-meridionalizzazione* (verbal noun) to be able to fit neatly in the new surroundings. Martina Satriano uses ‘de-meridionalizzare’ in the sense of dropping the typically Italian traits (south) and acquiring American (north) ones. She uses the Italian as she cannot find a satisfactory English term. Duranti does so despite the American target readership being not receptive to the Italian term at all. It is therefore the case of Martina trying to ‘express’ herself and the Italian traits of her personality rather than trying to establish communication.

The novel is subdivided into eight chapters that are titled after recipes for dishes that Martina likes to prepare. There is one recipe for each day of the week. The names of the days are dutifully translated while the rendition of the recipe names follows an uneven pattern (the first name of a dish is in Italian): *risotto alla milanese* is ‘risotto alla Milanese,’ *aragosta armoricaine* is ‘lobster Armoricaine,’ *salmone al cartoccio* is ‘salmone en papier,’ *carciofi alla giuda* is ‘artichokes alla giuda,’ *soufflé di asparagi* is ‘asparagus soufflé,’ *porcini trifolati* is ‘porcini and potatoes,’ *sorbetto al rabarbaro* is ‘rhubarb sorbet,’ and eventually, *gâteau des adieux* is ‘gâteau des adieux.’ The ‘aragosta’ and ‘salmone’ dishes, however, are translated respectively as ‘lobster’ and ‘salmon’ while the *carciofi/artichokes* stayed ‘*alla giuda*’ – Judas style. In English, the ‘porcini’ mushrooms are accompanied by potatoes while in Italian they are ‘*trifolati*’ – cooked in oil with parsley and garlic. The last two recipes use French culinary prowess as an intermediary. Martina Satriano is a passionate cook, and this list of her favourite dishes reflects and symbolises her bi-cultural predicament.

The inconsistencies displayed in Duranti’s self-translation of these recipes point to her deployment of varied translation strategies. In the terminology of Venuti, these can range from a source-language oriented foreignising translation ‘that seek[s] to register linguistic and cultural differences’ (Venuti 1995/2017: xiii), to a target-language oriented translation that is ‘domesticating insofar as it aims to interpret the source text in terms that are intelligible and interesting in the receiving situation (Venuti 1995/2017: xii).

Furthermore, as Wilson asserts (2009:194), Martina’s search for her other possible selves comes to an end when she realizes that ‘she is what she is’ and that what is important in life is to succeed at being oneself, at being ‘unnatural with sufficient *naturalizza*’:

The problem is how to succeed at being unnatural with sufficient *naturalzza*. I can only express my meaning in Italian, because the word ‘naturalness’ I found in the dictionary a few days ago has for me such an unnatural ring. ‘Naturalness’ does really translate ‘*naturalzza*’, a word that means a way of being, of behaving, living or feeling. [...] I wonder. (Duranti 2000:117)

As a self-translator, Duranti keeps the Italian word in the English text with the explanation given by her *alter ego* that the English equivalent ‘has... an unnatural ring.’ The author suggests, at the beginning of this passage, that ‘the problem’ is how to be *unnatural* in a *natural* way (‘with sufficient *naturalzza*’), how to ‘succeed’ in writing in English, in a foreign language, with native-like flow and elegance comparable to her mastery of the Italian language.

The Italian text states that ‘è una parola che so dire solo in italiano perché in inglese è troppo brutta’ (Duranti 1996: 227). The Italian adjective ‘*brutta*’ means ‘ugly’ and Martina asserts that the English word is too ‘ugly.’ This, however, is not mentioned in the English text where she only states that the English word has an ‘unnatural ring.’ Martina (Duranti) does not carry out a comparative analysis of the semiotics of the words ‘*naturalzza*’ and ‘naturalness’ and we can assume that she is content with their correspondence. She notices, though, the ‘unnatural ring’ of the English term and its musical, metrical, phonetic and aesthetic shortcomings.

Duranti brings elements of the Italian language and culture into America creating, therefore, her own, personalised variety of the English language. This is a well-documented strategy and Polezzi observes that:

Most migrant writers who have chosen to write in an adopted language maintain strong traces of the presence of other tongues, other codes and other cultures, creating forms of polilingual writing which are always already marked by the presence of translation and whose existence would not be possible without the intervention of translation processes. (Polezzi 2012: 351)

In line with Polezzi’s observation, the Italian text states that ‘bisogna ignorare i bambini a scampo di passare per *child molester*’ (Duranti 1996: 227). The English version

renders this as ‘but never children or you’ll be taken for child molester’ (Duranti 2000: 117). Italian can render ‘child molester’ as ‘*molestatore di bambini*’ or ‘*pedofilo*.’ The likely reason for the self-translator to opt not to translate this expression is the context. This paragraph begins with the narrator stating that ‘this country – this city rather – is mine too.’ She then goes on asserting that she managed to learn the basic local norms of behaviour (‘*galateo*’ / ‘etiquette’) before giving us a list of norms such as to smile at people in the West Village but avoid eye contact in uptown elevators and finally, to pet dogs but not children (child molestation). Martina (Duranti) contradicts herself. Her claim that the city belongs to her is followed by her ironic take on the city’s etiquette that culminates with the advice not to pet children to avoid being viewed as a potential child abuser. In the Italian, catholic, patriarchal milieu patting children in the park or giving them sweets is an essential part ‘*il galateo*’ (the etiquette). Duranti, therefore, leaves the expression in English because although, the words exist in Italian, the concept is alien, it is American, typical of New York, a place she struggles to come to terms with.

Though Duranti is not an economic migrant, she finds herself, in linguistic and cultural terms, in a situation comparable to that of any other migrant. In such a context, Polezzi’s observation about migrant polilingualism is applicable to this author too. Duranti is also an experienced translator and she consciously introduces elements of Italian culture and language in her self-translation to re-create as accurate as possible a representation of the process of acquiring an Italo-American identity.

3.4 How does Duranti see her own practice of self-translation?

Sogni Mancini was published in 1996 and *Left-Handed Dreams* in 2000. From the very beginning, however, Duranti intended to write two versions of the novel. In an interview the author explains that this was the first novel she wrote in America and that it had to reflect her linguistic and cultural experience:

I thought it in Italian and also in English. At some point as it happened, the Italian text started to run while the English one (my English is good but is not my first and not even my second language) limped behind.¹⁹ (Duranti 2014)

Duranti describes her creative process as eminently bilingual. She thought in both Italian and English and completed the Italian text first due to formal linguistic obstacles that made her English writing production more laborious and time-consuming.

Left-Handed Dreams was (re-)written in English with a contribution from McGowan and another American friend whom McGowan mentions (not by name) in her introduction to the novel (McGowan 2000). It is not possible to ascertain the exact measure of McGowan or the second friend's interventions in the English text. It could be argued however, that consultations with colleagues and friends as well as editorial interventions are part and parcel of any literary or translation process. The novel is clearly copyrighted by Francesca Duranti with the caveat that 'portions' are to be attributed to McGowan (Duranti 2000).

Talking about her self-translation experience, Duranti asserts that:

The biggest problems are ethical. The respect towards the author should be sacred. But also, the respect towards the reader, to whom we need to deliver without abusing it the literary meaning but also everything else that I mentioned before (specific weight, colour, etc. the numerical values of the text). It is a very delicate business. We shouldn't change a single coma if not to overcome a linguistic obstacle that impedes better understanding of not only *what* the author said but also of *how* they said so.²⁰ (Duranti 2014)

The author advocates for the reader of the second text to be given access not only to the 'content' or the 'message' of the literary work ('what'), but also to the artistic nuances the 'specific weight, colour etc. (the 'how),' as they are originally conceived (or perceived) by the author herself in this case.

¹⁹ 'Io pensavo in italiano e anche in inglese. In realtà, il testo italiano a un certo punto ha cominciato a correre, mentre quello inglese [lo conosco bene, ma non è la mia prima, e neppure seconda, lingua] arrancava al seguito'.

²⁰ 'I maggiori problemi sono etici. Il rispetto per l'autore, che dovrebbe essere sacro. Ma anche il rispetto per il lettore, a cui bisogna consegnare senza manipolazioni il senso letterale, ma anche tutto quello che dicevo sopra (peso specifico, colore, ecc. i valori numerici del testo). È una faccenda molto delicata. Non bisogna cambiare una virgola, se non, per superare l'ostacolo linguistico che si frappone alla miglior comprensione, non solo di "cosa" l'autore ha detto ma anche di "come" lo ha detto'.

The self-translator, Duranti, proposes the re-creation of the text within a new linguistic and cultural paradigm, a process akin to her own decision to move to America and acquire, to some extent, an American identity. A literary re-creation, she asserts, that must consider the author's intentions as well as to 'respect' the new target reader who needs to be treated with equal care as the target reader of the first text. The author feels obliged, therefore, to acquire the new identity and adopt a new vantage point in order to be able to re-write the novel in English.

Duranti set out to simultaneously produce her novel in two versions and only an apparent lack of proficiency in English slowed her down and delayed the production of this text. She has always insisted that her creative endeavour was a form of writing rather than translating fiction. Scholars concur with her view – *Left Handed Dreams* is a re-write, a text that adds meaning and offers new perspectives.

For Duranti, the very self-translation process was intrinsically related to her endeavour to develop, establish and articulate a bi-cultural and bi-lingual identity. During this process she did not consider producing a 'stereo-effect' for the benefit of her bilingual readers. She wrote, therefore, with two distinct communities and their respective horizons of expectations in mind.

Duranti's self-translation procedure is a fine example of the activity's chronophagous nature. She asserts how the Italian text 'started to run' immediately while the English lagged behind. This temporal hiatus seems to be induced by the need for language-related editorial support. It is hard to appraise the exact extent of the influence that this temporal delay had on the final version of the English text. What is of importance though, is that this process was felt as heavily 'chronophagous', time-consuming. She set off as to work in parallel on two 'open' texts but ended up with the first text being published and 'closed' in 1996 while the second one came along four years later.

3.5 In this context, what is an original?

Duranti asserts that during the writing of the English version of *Sogni Mancini*, she felt it necessary to bypass obstacles and she concludes that the apparent result of such an approach is that these are two different texts (Duranti 2014). We can only assume that by 'bypassing

obstacles' she means the deployment of varied translation strategies and approaches as per our previous discussion. She also refers to the process as one of 'writing' ('scrivevo') rather than one of translation or self-translation. This is consistent with the statement of McGowan that Duranti always had the intention of writing two different ('autonomous') novels.

Duranti refers to the two texts as two different 'books' ('libri') and therefore as two 'original' texts produced by the author herself. To grant the second text the status of 'original' she had to 'bypass obstacles' that we can articulate as possibly belonging to two varieties:

- a. Those pertaining to the process of creative writing, and,
- b. Those pertaining to translation.²¹

In writing the English text, Duranti worked from the already published Italian version and had to follow the parameters of this first text. On the other hand, since she authors both texts and since she wants to express her 'American identity' she cannot engage in translation either and as an experienced literary translator she is familiar with the constraints of the profession.

The inner cover pages of the novel (Troubadour 2000) inform us that the novel was 'written by and translated from the original Italian by Francesca Duranti,' and also, that it was edited and introduced by Nicoletta Di Ciolla McGowan. 'Written by and translated' equates to self-translated – the author and the 'translator' are one and the same person. The publisher, however, deems the first, Italian version to be the 'original' in contrast with the author's intention to produce two 'originals.' However, from Duranti's own testimony and from that of McGowan, we know that the intention was to write and publish the two novels at the same time and that the reason why the Italian text was completed and published first was that the English version 'limped' – Duranti is a native speaker of Italian and not of English.

Wilson suggests that 'whatever may induce an author to begin and complete a process of self-translation, it has to do with the possibility not so much of mere repetition, but of gaining perspective, of adding meaning.' Wilson concludes that 'this is clearly Duranti's intention in re-writing *Sogni Mancini* in English' (2007: 391). Self-translation or re-writing is, in the view of this scholar, an additional creative activity intent on enhancing perspective and meaning as well as helping construct a new 'immigrant' identity.

²¹ For the purpose of this comparison, we can define creative writing as the process of writing a first, original text while translation is the process of rendering an already existing text into another language.

Furthermore, in the words of Polezzi ‘Once we consider the mobility of people as well as that of texts, the linear notion of translation... as it moves across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries becomes largely insufficient’ (2012: 347). Duranti moves back and forth between Tuscany and New York and to challenge this ‘linear notion of translation’ she engages in self-translation, a new paradigm that better befits her existential position.

Duranti reaches out to the new American audience to express her newly acquired bi-cultural self that keeps on ‘commuting’ geographically between New York and Tuscany as well as between two languages, cultures and indeed, two texts. Wilson argues that these two texts ‘function simultaneously as hypotext and hypertext,’ and that ‘neither can be pointed to as the original one, or they both can’ (Wilson 2009: 190). Since the Italian text was published in 1996 and the English version in 2000, in our view, the first text, due to the temporal distance and the fact that it was published, was ‘closed’ and could not have acted as a source (‘hypotext’) text. Evidence suggests, however, that Duranti’s initial intention was to write two ‘open’ texts that could be read as ‘autonomous’ and ‘originals’ of equal creative standing.

Duranti moved to New York at the age of fifty-nine and her accounts and reflections on her self-translation practice as well as the relevant critical commentaries, fail to shed sufficient light on a fundamental aspect of her bilingual work – her mastery, or lack of it, of the English language.

There is plenty of evidence of Duranti’s successful professional engagement as a literary translator from English into Italian. It is, however, a completely different proposition to translate *into* English, and even more so to fulfil the high aesthetic demands that the author herself outlines as self-imposed on her practice. In that respect, the process of establishing herself and her identity as part-American suffered as the result of a lack of native-like language fluency.

We could agree, nonetheless, that the linguistic shortcoming in her self-translation practice has been mediated by the inclusion of ‘friends’ who acted as editors and helped her bring the English text to a publishable standard. This literary and translation process, however, cannot alleviate the linguistic and cultural contrast (Italy/America) in terms of her identity building (‘translated being’).

An experienced literary translator as well as an author, Duranti divides her life between two distinct physical, geographical and metaphysical locations featuring distinct languages

and cultures. A direct consequence of such an experience is her self-translation practice and the production of *Sogni mancini* and *Left-Handed Dreams*, two texts that are aimed at bridging the source-target text dichotomy and enable the author to engage more fully with her pluri-cultural and multilingual experience. The second, English text was used by the author to modify and amplify aspects of the first text. Duranti's self-translation effort strengthened her bi-cultural identity-building efforts and gave her the opportunity to 'speak out' in a new language and to a completely new audience. This experience gave her the 'possibility' to not only become an English language, American author but to bring the two identities together into one single, bi-cultural person whose vehicle of expression of choice is trans-lingual writing and in the case of this novel, self-translation.

Duranti's bilingual work challenges the contrast between original and translation. She set out to write two versions of this novel and she had the intention of doing so simultaneously. While she did not accomplish this, we can conclude that *Sogni mancini* and *Left-handed Dreams* occupy a space outside the traditional dichotomy: 'original' – 'translation.'

Chapter 4: Vesna Goldsworthy

4.1 Background information

Vesna Goldsworthy, née Bjelogrić, was born in Belgrade, Serbia (Yugoslavia) in 1961. She studied comparative literature at the University of Belgrade and in 1996 she moved to London to join her British husband.²² In Britain, Goldsworthy completed her doctoral studies in English literature and then worked as a journalist at the BBC. She is now Professor of Creative Writing at the universities of Exeter and East Anglia.

Goldsworthy began her writing career by publishing poetry in Serbian, while in England she wrote scholarly and journalistic texts first. She describes the experience of writing in a foreign language as exciting and scary:

I compare it in my memoir to driving a fast, new car: you have fewer inhibitions and taboos, you enjoy the road, you tell your stories differently from the native speakers, but you always feel that little bit closer to an accident, a loss of control. (Câlțea 2017)

Goldsworthy found herself in a bilingual situation where she developed divergent relationships with her two languages and cultures that are inextricably linked to specific historical and political experiences.²³ Her doctoral thesis was published under the title *Inventing Ruritania* (1998. London: Hurst Publishers) and, in the words of the British historian and renowned Balkanologist Misha Glenny, sought to explain ‘the peculiar form of literary and ideological imperialism visited on the Balkans’ (Glenny 1999: 13). In this work, Goldsworthy ‘explores this history of Western perceptions and prejudices by tracing the

²²Most of the information about Goldsworthy comes from the interview that NR conducted with the author in December 2017. The transcript of the interview is available in Appendix 1.

²³ The 90s in the Balkans were characterised by political turmoil and civil war.

development of Balkan images in English literature from Byron through *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *Dracula*, Olivia Manning's *Balkan Trilogy* and beyond' (*ibid.*). *Inventing Ruritania* attempts, therefore, to act as a bridge between the two worlds that Goldsworthy tries to reconcile at a historical, cultural and emotional level.

The author's next work was the memoir *Chernobyl Strawberries* (2005). This memoir was written in English as Goldsworthy wanted to write a 'kind of notebook' for her son who does not read Serbian (Goldsworthy 2017). Initially, the author did not intend on publishing this work but, at some point during the writing process, she realised that her English was 'up to' creative writing which gave her the necessary injection (Goldsworthy 2017).

Chernobyl Strawberries was followed by *The Angel of Salonika / Solunski anđeo* (2011), a collection of poetry that Goldsworthy wrote 'simultaneously' in English and in Serbian (Goldsworthy 2017). In 2015, Goldsworthy published her first novel – *Gorsky*. The following year, in 2016 she published the self-translated Serbian version – *Gorski*. The author has since published another novel in English, *Monsieur Ka* (2017) that was translated into Serbian by Nataša Kučev (2017. *Gospodin Ka*. Belgrade: Geopoetika)

4.2 The socio-political, cultural and linguistic context

Vesna Goldsworthy was raised in Belgrade in a family with Serbian and Montenegrin roots. Serbia is in the Balkans, a region characterised by the co-existence of three major religions (Catholic and Orthodox Christianity as well as Islam), a multitude of languages,²⁴ two scripts (Cyrillic and Latin) and a dozen small countries.

The cultural milieu of the Balkans is determined by this multitude of peoples, cultures and languages as well as its ties to historical and often mythical roots that the British find hard to comprehend. Goldsworthy illustrates this gap between the British and the Balkans with the following anecdote:

My Montenegrin grandma always said what she thought. She wasn't contaminated by political correctness. Her point of view was always very simple and funny too: for a grandmother, the world divides itself into 'us' and 'them.' Us – the Serbs and other Christians – and them; the Turks who took

²⁴ Serbian, Greek, Albanian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Hungarian, Slovene among others.

over the rest of the world, in Africa and Asia. She was also very jolly. When I visited her with my husband in Montenegro, she described to him in detail the technique of cutting and marinating human heads. Of course, she had never seen decapitated heads in her life, but she thought that it was necessary to tease an Englishman. (CafeBabel 2008)

This passage addresses the complexity of the Balkans and brings to the fore the challenge of describing the region's historical and cultural background to a foreign audience. Bridging such a cultural gap is a challenge that most people face when in a bilingual and bi-cultural position. Such an 'abridgment' is a common thread in Goldsworthy's work.²⁵

In describing her position, the author maintains that:

To be bilingual is weird, for example I only learnt to cook in England and the main part of my related vocabulary is therefore only in English. In the same way, I am not able to describe many themes related to Serbia in English, because in English very often those words simply don't exist which can best fit with the Serb meaning. If I think of my childhood and youth, I think in Serbian, and on the contrary if I think of what I am going to get for lunch, it'll be in English. (CafeBabel 2008)

For Goldsworthy Serbian is the language of her youth while English is the language, she now uses daily at home and in her professional life. She also recognises that literature is becoming trans-national and increasingly marked by multiple belongings while transcending, at the same time, national and linguistic boundaries (Câlțea 2017). In relation to her own experience, the author states that she is often billed as a Serbian writer in England and as a British writer in Serbia. Her own creative writing practice, therefore, transcends linguistic and national boundaries (Câlțea 2017).

Both the Serbs and the Montenegrins are of Orthodox Christian faith and have close links with the Russian cultural world and language, a fact that admittedly influenced Goldsworthy's literary affinities and that will come to the fore in some of the choices she made in *Gorsky*.

²⁵ 'I'm writing about the same thing again and again. Ruritania and the Angel... complement each other.' (Goldsworthy 2017)

4.3 *Gorsky / Gorski*

In the words of the author herself, *Gorsky* is a loose adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Goldsworthy maintains that over a long period of time and for different reasons, this specific novel has been a favourite of hers. She read the novel in Serbian first and subsequently in English. With the passage of time, her language competence in English increased enabling her to immerse herself in the text and develop a great appreciation for 'the beauty of poetic expression of Fitzgerald's language'. The author also affirms that she always loved that kind of archetypal love story (Goldsworthy 2015).²⁶

Goldsworthy stresses the importance of her re-readings of Fitzgerald's masterpiece and makes a clear distinction, in purely aesthetic terms, between her readings of the translation (in Serbian) and of the 'original' (Goldsworthy 2015).

Goldsworthy's novel is set in London, Goldsworthy's hometown that she finds attractive, repulsive but also inspiring (Goldsworthy 2015). The cosmopolitan megapolis is the playground of wealthy people from around the world and in that respect, it matches the opulent *milieu* of Fitzgerald's novel.

The plot of the Goldsworthy novel follows that of *The Great Gatsby*. The narrator is Nikola (Nick) Kimovic, a Serbian immigrant with a degree in English literature who works in a Chelsea bookshop. Tom is a wealthy and charming womanizer while his wife Natalia is the woman that the mysterious Russian billionaire, Roman Gorsky has loved all his life. At the beginning of the novel Gorsky enters Nick's bookshop to commission London's best private library for his luxurious home. Tom and Gorsky fight over Natalia and both get into trouble while Nick is carried along as an observer and our narrator. The story ends in tragedy with Gorsky being killed in error.

An important aspect of this novel is the origin of the characters. London is a megapolis and hosts hundreds of diverse ethnic groups. Goldsworthy, however, chose to 'translate' Fitzgerald's American characters into an Englishman (Tom), two Russians (Natalia and

²⁶ 'Gatsby je jedan od mojih omiljenih romana, ali razlozi za to se menjaju. Trebalo mi je da zaista uronim u engleski da potpuno shvatim poetsku lepotu Ficdžeraldovog jezika, ali oduvek sam volela tu arhetipsku ljubavnu priču'.

Gorsky)²⁷ and a Serbian (Nick). The author is Serbian and so is her narrator Nick, to some extent, the author's alter ego. From a British perspective, Serbs are Orthodox Christians and speak a Slavic language which makes them 'little Russians'. Indeed, many Serbs adopt a Pan-Slavic, neo-Russian identity, a point that is articulated in the masterpiece of Serbian literature, Miloš Crnjanski's *Novel about London*. The main character of the Crnjanski novel is a white-Russian émigré, Prince Ryepnin. Goldsworthy suggests that 'Russian has a meaning, kind of the otherness, the other self that you feel you belong to. It's a vague concept, not something precise... Yes, and it is not political, it is very cultural...' (Goldsworthy 2017). The author chooses for her main characters to be Russians as this makes the characters more visible (Russia is a large and significant country and culture) while at the same time inclusive of the Serbian identity. Goldsworthy is of the view that the Russian and Serbian literatures have strong connections (Goldsworthy 2017). She maintains that she feels the Russian culture as her own, but she makes it clear that she is uncomfortable with a direct analogy between Serbs and Russians as she finds such analogies counterproductive (Ognjenović 2015).²⁸ The Russian trope is, therefore, a useful narrative tool, a representation that, unlike the intricacies of the Balkan tangle, seems much less confusing to the British readership.

4.4 How does Goldsworthy see her own practice of self-translation?

After *Chernobyl Strawberries*, her encouraging first attempt at prose writing in English, Goldsworthy embarked on a bilingual journey that best reflected her cultural and linguistic reality. She wrote a collection of poems, *The Angel of Salonika / Solunski anđeo* in English and Serbian, simultaneously:

If I started a poem and the first line came to me in Serbian... I immediately translated it into English and I would not progress with the poem unless each line was working in both.....it was a simultaneous translation.... it was step by step, but it was deliberate I can't guarantee that was the case for every poem but for most... (Goldsworthy 2017)

²⁷ Roman Gorsky is a Russian Jew but culturally and linguistically he is Russian.

²⁸ 'It must be said that most Serbs think of Russian culture as 'their own,' so Goldsworthy is not an isolated case but a typical representative of the prevalent Serbian pro-Russian sentiment.

The author maintains that she did not have an elaborate plan and that she kept switching from one language to the other. She maintains that for some poems she is not even sure which is the first version and that therefore we have two original texts, one in English and one in Serbian (Goldsworthy 2015).²⁹ Goldsworthy describes, therefore, a ‘simultaneous’ bilingual production of two texts where she is able to, quite like Samuel Beckett or André Brink, hop back and forth from one version to the other so that no version can claim ‘originality’. It is important to note that Goldsworthy published poetry in Serbian before coming to Britain. She therefore did see herself, at some point in life, as a Serbian poet. English as a means of expressing abstract and intimate thoughts and feelings came later as an addition to her Serbian work. Such a co-existence of two languages and two poetical ‘personalities’ found its most natural expression in the simultaneous writing in two languages, in self-translation, in the articulation of a poetic discourse in both her languages.

When it comes to *Gorsky*, however, the author explains that she wrote the novel in English first and that at the time she did not even contemplate self-translating it into Serbian: ‘It was written in English and I translated it into Serbian....’ (Goldsworthy 2017). She makes, therefore, a clear-cut distinction between the act of ‘writing’ the first text and that of ‘translating’ the second. The English text was out of her hands, she asserts, and she ‘translated it from bound proofs. It wasn’t out, it wasn’t published in English, but it was too late to change anything’ (Goldsworthy 2017). Unlike the *Angel of Salonika / Solunski Anđeo* poems that were written simultaneously, the English and the Serbian versions of *Gorsky* were written in a consecutive fashion.

Living in London, Goldsworthy is fully immersed in the English language. She uses the language at home with family, at work, to write fiction and academic papers as well as to socialise. Her proficiency can be described as near-native or native-like and writing two versions of a collection of poetry did not require extensive additional proofreading and editing work. Nonetheless, she only decided to self-translate her novel upon the insistence of her Belgrade publisher and close friend, Vladislav Bajac (Goldsworthy 2017). The one notable difference between Goldsworthy the poet and Goldsworthy the novelist, is that the poet had

²⁹ ‘Solunskog anđela sam pisala dvojezično, malo na srpskom malo na engleskom, za neke pesme ni sama ne znam koja je prva verzija, pa se tu o dva originala, ako hoćete...’ (Bazdulj 2015)

had a previous, articulated identity (published poems) in the Serbian language while the novelist did not. It is possible, therefore, that Goldsworthy shaped herself, in her own eyes, as a British novelist while she could not have done so with her poetry.

In an interview, Goldsworthy maintains that she finds both the ‘re-writing’ and the ‘writing’ of a new novel challenging for ‘they bring different kinds of difficulty, different kinds of anxiety, and they both require originality’ (Câlțea 2017). Here, the author uses the terms ‘writing’ and ‘re-writing’ slightly distancing herself from the previously used dichotomy original (source text) – translation (target text). Nonetheless, she asserts that both writing and self-translation are creative activities.

In a further interview, Goldsworthy describes her procedure as self-translation and reiterates that her second text, the Serbian version is a ‘translation’ (Goldsworthy 2017).³⁰ While it is beyond the scope of this inquiry to ascertain the exact meaning of the terms ‘writing’ and ‘translation’ in Goldsworthy’s terminology, we can conclude that in her usage, ‘translation’ is clearly distinct from ‘writing.’

Initially, the author had no intention of self-translating her novel: ‘had I been thinking about translating it into Serbian I would have thought about the names [of the characters] very seriously... I gave them the names in the first draft and many of them stayed because they are funny’ (Goldsworthy 2017). The author took good care to keep the original names of her characters although to the Serbian reader some (Serbian names) might sound odd.³¹ Goldsworthy aimed, therefore, for her work in Serbian to be read as a ‘translation’ of the English ‘original.’ She expected the Serbian target audience to read her text as a translation, as they would read any other British author translated from the English language.

Goldsworthy anticipated that some of the Serbian readers would access both versions of the novel and she felt that she had to be ‘faithful,’ and therefore, she ‘tried to stick to it, to resist...’ (Goldsworthy 2017). The author views translation (this one specifically, at least) as a process that requires the translator to be ‘faithful’ to the source text. She also asserts how she had to labour hard to achieve such a ‘faithfulness’, and we can conclude that such efforts

³⁰ Professor Goldsworthy is supervisor of the creative part of this PhD thesis and as such she is aware, unlike Ferré and Duranti, of some of the salient theoretical issues in the field of self-translation and the overall scope of this study. Her assertions about the nature of her self-translation process should be understood therefore, within this context.

³¹ The surname Kimovic, although Slavic sounding to the British ear, does not resonate with a Serbian speaker.

must have been directed towards preventing herself from continuing to write, create and/or re-write the text. It appears, therefore, that she did not aim at modifying, developing or amplifying the first text but rather at ‘translating,’ ‘repeating’ the text within the context of the Serbian language without taking into consideration the wider cultural context. While Goldsworthy did expect some of her readers to access both texts, there is no evidence to suggest that she aimed at creating a ‘stereo effect’ by introducing textual modulations to create a new, intertextual aesthetic component for the benefit of such readers.

Based on Goldsworthy’s account, a significant discrepancy is noticeable between the process of, and the approach to writing/translating the collection of poetry and the novel. In the first instance, in the case of poetry, the process was simultaneous and the author herself is not aware which version came chronologically first. She, therefore, approached this task as creative writing rather than a ‘translation.’ The self-translation process of writing *Gorski*, however, has been consecutive. The time-gap was not large, less than a year, but the author’s intention has obviously been to ‘translate’ rather than to re-write for a new audience. Goldsworthy asserts that she expected her self-translation to be a quick job which, however, proved not to be the case: ‘I could have written several chapters of my new novel instead of translating it into Serbian’ (Goldsworthy 2017). It transpires, from this statement, that writing a new text holds a higher creative ground than translating and existing one. Goldsworthy regards self-translation as time consuming within the context of the creative output. She seems to regard self-translation as chronophagous in the sense that it slows down the writing process of the next ‘new,’ first text. She maintains, furthermore, that the main motivation behind her self-translation effort was the insistence of her Belgrade publisher and friend Vladimir Bajac.

Goldsworthy approached the writing of the collection of poetry and of the novel in different ways. Vesna Bjelogrić, the Serbian poet, found herself in a new ‘reality,’ acquired a new language and developed a bi-cultural and bi-lingual identity that found its best articulation in the simultaneous writing of two versions of *The Angel of Salonika*. Later in life, Vesna Goldsworthy, the British novelist, feels fully integrated in the British society she lives in. She writes in English and engages in self-translation for reasons that are not necessarily related to identity-building of creative expression. Such a rationale behind her

self-translation practice does not diminish in any way, of course, the aesthetic or literary merits of the Serbian version of the novel.

4.5 In this context, what is an original?

Goldsworthy's two versions of the collection of poetry were published independently and she never tried to bring them together in the same volume as part of a single literary project. This being the case, the author suggests that these are two distinct originals rather than one single original written in two languages.

She self-translated *Gorsky* however, in a consecutive fashion. The English text was 'closed' and, as per our previous discussion, it could not be modified. Goldsworthy maintains that the English (version) is the 'original' and that she wanted the Serbian text to be a faithful translation rather than a rewrite. In stating so, the author makes a clear differentiation among three different categories of texts: the original, the re-write and the translation.

Goldsworthy maintains that she tried to make the Serbian text a 'translation' and suggests that there were perhaps some places where she used her prerogative as a writer to alter 'things' (Goldsworthy 2017). In her view therefore, it is by altering 'things' that a self-translator re-writes the first text. The self-translator opted, however, to forfeit her creative writer's prerogative in order to conform with a view of translation in line with Jakobson's definition ('an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language') and with the expectation of the Serbian target audience of *Gorski* as the Serbian translation of a British author.

In the introductory pages of the novel, the narrator, Nikola Kimovic, engages in a lengthy internal monologue. We learn about his life back in Belgrade, his studies and his move to the UK:

I am from a small and insignificant nation in an insignificant corner of Europe and am glad this is so. For this story my nationality matters only in the negative, only in so far as I was neither English nor Russian... You could say I am tumbleweed, a species that disengages from its roots once matured. The condition of exile was not altogether unpleasant. I had chosen it for myself. (*Gorski* 4)

According to his monologue, Nikola moved to London in the early 90s, at the beginning of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and a terrifying decade marred by civil wars and culminating with the NATO bombing of the third Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)³². In this passage, Nikola informs the reader that the nation he originates from (Serbian) is 'insignificant' and that is situated in an 'insignificant corner of Europe'. He feels that his national identity is irrelevant, that he matured and is uprooted from his 'insignificant' Balkan origins. He also informs us that his 'exile' is self-imposed and overall, quite bearable.

I, the author of this Study, am myself from Belgrade, have a comparable academic background and I left Yugoslavia at the same time. In these thirty years I have met many refugees and immigrants from the region, and I have learnt at least two things. Firstly, in the Western world in the 90s it was impossible to conceal one's Serbian identity. Serbs were promoted by all the media as the 'bad guys' and one was challenged on a daily basis. You could, perhaps, claim to be a Croat or a Muslim, but you could not claim that your national identity was irrelevant because, among other things, this would be the equivalent of claiming higher moral ground, impartiality and unbiased opinions in matters related to the Yugoslav conflicts. Secondly, no Serb I have ever met would describe their nation as 'insignificant.' It is beyond the scope of our inquiry to discuss whether this is a matter of national pride, mythomania or historical facts, but all Serbs believe that their 14th century kingdom stopped the advance of the Ottoman Turks saving, thus, Christian Europe, and that Gavrilo Princip's assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo (1914) triggered³³ the beginning of World War One. Most Serbs also believe that the Balkans are the powder keg of Europe, as historians often like to contend. It is also very hard to imagine a Yugoslav leaving their country in the early 90s without feeling external, political, economic or some other sort of pressure. There are people, of course, who are pre-disposed to travel and live abroad. Such individuals would have done so possibly, regardless of the social or political upheaval or otherwise in their home country. However, when one's country is crumbling and then literally exploding in front of their eyes, it is onerous to insist that one has left out of their own free will ('I had chosen it for myself').

³² First was the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1941) followed by Tito's Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1991). The third was the so-called ramp-Yugoslavia from 91 to 2003 when the country changed its name to Serbia & Montenegro.

³³ Serbs believe that Princip's act accelerated events but did not cause *per se* WW1.

When it comes to his national identity and immigrant (exile) status, Nik Kimovic is, therefore, not a typical Serb. The author does not give us any clear guidance or any explanation why this would be the case – why her narrator is such an atypical person. We must assume, therefore, that this is a narrative technique. Goldsworthy wanted, on one hand, a Serbian narrator, quite like herself, an alter ego of a sort, and on the other hand, not to overburden the narration with Nikola's historical, cultural or intimate details. Something that the English reader will be perfectly happy with. After all, this is an uplifting story³⁴ about London and Russian billionaires and an homage to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, not a depressing Balkan psychological yarn.

The question arises, though, how does the author negotiate these historical, cultural and national identity motifs in the Serbian version? Does she translate faithfully the English text or seeks to modify its content to accommodate details about Nikola that the Serbian reader would find of interest? Does she make efforts to alleviate the impact of Nikola's view of his people and culture as 'insignificant'? Or does she, perhaps, explain her own rationale for the narrator's posture?

Here is the equivalent Serbian text:

Potičem iz jedne male i beznačajne nacije u beznačajnom uglu Evrope I drago mi je što je to tako. Za ovu priču moja nacionalnost je značajna samo u negativu, samo po tome što nisam ni Englez ni Rus... Moglo bi se reći da sam ja onaj vetrovalj, kotrljajuća trava koja se odvaja od svojih korena kada sazri. Egzilantsko stanje nije mi sasvim neprijatno. Sam sam ga za sebe izabrao. (*Gorski* 13)

This passage, we note, is a fair translation, without alterations or narrative features designed to modify the narrator's views. Nikola's nation and the region are both 'beznačajne' ('insignificant'), his identity is 'u negativu' (in the negative'), he has no roots anymore ('matured' out of them) and his exile is still not completely unpleasant ('nije sasvim neprijatno'). The writer does not offer any explanation for her narrator's rather unusual feelings and beliefs. It is also noticeable that the Serbian translation suffers from the influence of the first, English text. For instance, at the syntaxis level, 'I drago mi je što je to tako' ('... am glad this is so') is a literal, verbatim translation of the original and not a structure that a

³⁴ The book cover recommends the novel as 'written with narrative elegance' (M. Frayn), 'entertaining and poignant' (E. Hoffman), 'wickedly imagined... funny' (N. Ascherson) and 'spellbinding' (S. Zinovieff).

native speaker would use. At a vocabulary level, 'vetrovalj' ('tumbleweed') is not a plant that most Serbian speakers would be familiar with. Also, the expression 'egzilantsko stanje' ('the condition of exile') sounds awkward and 'stanje egzila' would be preferred.

As the comparative analysis of these two passages show, Goldsworthy did not try to modify her text with the Serbian reader in mind. Her second text seems to have been facing the English original rather than a new readership.

Goldsworthy saw her role, we can conclude, not so much as a translingual, self-translating novelist, but as a British author who translates into Serbian. It is not possible to infer that the author does not wish to belong to both communities. It is my view that she does wish to belong to both communities but in different ways, not as a bilingual author but rather as a British author and a Serbian translator. There is no evidence that Goldsworthy's (self-) translation procedure aimed at modifying or amplifying the first text. While she did expect some readers to access both versions, she did not aim at creating a 'stereo effect'.

Chapter 5: My own practice

5.1 Background information

I was born in Belgrade, Serbia (Yugoslavia) in 1959. When I was four, my family moved to Milan, Italy where my father worked in diplomatic service. I attended an Italian pre-school and school and was fully immersed in the language. My family returned to Belgrade in 1973. I attended a grammar school where I studied the Latin, English and German languages and then went on to study Italian and English languages and literature at the University of Belgrade. During my studies I spent two semesters at the University of Perugia in Italy. In the early nineties, I moved to New Zealand where I worked as a fisherman before enrolling into a Master in Italian language degree programme. I subsequently found employment at the University as a tutor in Italian language. In the late 90s I completed, at a distance, a master's degree programme in teaching with technology (University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada). In 2001 I moved to the UK where I work at the University of Cambridge as director of the world language university-wide programme.

In Belgrade, I translated literary essays and poetry from English, Italian, French and Spanish. After the studies I worked as a translator and interpreter. I also published a collection of poetry (1990. *Daleko od Španije*. Beograd: MIMO). In Auckland, New Zealand I was editor of the Serbian community radio programme Glas (Voice) from 1995 to 2001. During this period, I wrote weekly columns, essays in the Serbian language as well as news items in English. In 2010 I published my first novel, *O golmanima i bubnjarima*³⁵ (*Of Goalies and drummers*). The title is, correctly, understood by most native speakers to mean: “of marginalised people”. It is also a reference to the title of Ernesto Sabato’s novel, *Of Heroes and Tombs* (*Sobre heroes y tumbas*). My novel is a bildungsroman that follows the fate of

³⁵ *O golmanima i bubnjarima*, in the Cyrillic original.

two Belgrade childhood friends from the early 80s through the Balkan wars in the 90s and the first years of the third millennium. It is a novel about marginalised people, losers, not heroes.

I also published short stories in Italian and essays and academic works in English, Italian and Serbian. *The Russian Soul* is my first novel in English and the Serbian version is entitled *Izveštaj o slovenskoj duši*.³⁶

5.2. The socio-political, cultural and linguistic context

I have already outlined the Balkan context in the previous chapter, talking about Vesna Goldsworthy. I will, therefore, just briefly mention some additional salient moments relevant to the context of this study.

In my late teens and as a student I was an avid reader of Russian 19th and 20th century literature while, at the same time, infatuated in American and British blues music. I read the Russian classics from Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Esenin, Blok, Mayakovsky all in the translation and it is important to stress that due to the cultural and linguistic proximity, these translations were read (not only by myself) as if they were originally written in Serbian. The interest in blues ranged from the early African American singers of the Mississippi Delta, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, Albert King, Muddy Waters, Jimi Hendrix and Duane Allman, to name a few, to their British disciples such as John Mayall, Eric Clapton, Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker (The Cream), Steve Winwood, Peter Green. Blues records (LPs) did not come with a translation of the lyrics and often without any lyrics at all. Since it was important to understand the songs, my first attempts at translation date back to these songs of mostly American Black artists.

Yugoslavia was geographically, politically and culturally positioned between the West and the East, the capitalists and the communists, between NATO and the Warsaw pact without belonging to either. In a similar manner, the identity of many Yugoslavs was edified as a bridge rather than a fortress. Such an “intercultural” context informed my own cultural and linguistic growth. I fully adopted the English language in the early nineties when I moved

³⁶ *Izveštaj o slovenskoj duši*.

to New Zealand. I worked as a fisherman for several years in Nelson, a town on the northern tip of the South Island, before moving to Auckland where, at the University, I enrolled into a master's programme in Italian language and found employment in academia.

My experience with these three languages follows disparate trajectories. Serbian is my intimate mother tongue. Italian is the language of my childhood and native-like competence gave me a bilingual and bicultural disposition. My English, on the other hand, evolved through school lessons, Blues accords and themes, South Pacific commercial fishing expeditions and work in academia. Some of my experiences are unique to a language and I find it difficult to talk about them with precision in the other two languages. In English I could talk for hours describing trawlers, wharfs, seamen and fish species in a Kiwi-like accent and using appropriate local slang expressions. In my other two languages I just don't have the necessary vocabulary or, perhaps, even the inclination to do so. I found that most speakers of Serbian and Italian lack an understanding of the oceanic world and this specific industry – a communicative gap that, sometimes, is just too wide to fill.

It is not surprising, therefore, that my self-translation literary work brings together two of my languages as well as the Russian cultural and political trope so dear to me from my early reading days and cultural heritage. The present project (the novel and the study) aimed initially at producing three versions of the novel. I had planned one in Italian too. Once I started work on the first version (the Serbian one) I realised that writing two versions of the novel represented a monumental task and decided to downsize the project to the much more manageable two versions.

5.3 *The Russian Soul* / Izveštaj o slovenskoj duši

The Russian Soul is a literary thriller. The novel follows the basic conventions of the genre such as presenting a clear threat, high stakes, plot twists, dynamic characters, it is set in memorable locations such as Moscow, Rome, London, Cambridge and Helsinki and pacy action.

Thrillers are well established in the English-speaking world as a sub-group within the larger paradigm of crime-fiction literature. Authors such as Agatha Christie, Edgar Allan Poe, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammet as well as John LeCarré, Lee Childs and Ian Rankin, to

name a few, are household names. The genre is present in the Spanish, Italian French, German, Scandinavian and Russian literatures (Kaličanin 2020). Not so much, however, in the Serbian literature where crime fiction in general is largely represented in translation and where there were only a handful of attempts made by Serbian authors.⁵ The Serbian readership is accustomed to the genre conventions, however, mostly through films. In writing my genre-defined novel, therefore, I had to keep in mind the difference in the audiences' perception of the text – their respective horizons of expectation which differed at several levels, from genre conventions to the understanding of the motivation of my characters.

The main character in the novel is Alex Gorsky, a former Russian soldier and now security officer in the employ of Alexei Kaganov, a London-based oligarch. Gorsky and his friend Senka Golovkin find themselves in the centre of an international plot to gain access to the Siberian diamond fields. To execute their plan, the plotters need the Russian Soul, a precious jewel produced by the Fabergé jewellers for the Nikolai II Romanov, the last Tzar of Russia.

The term 'русская душа' (russkaya dusha), the Russian soul symbolises the character and unique nature of the great and mystifying spirit and identity of the Russian people. The concept arose in mid 19th century when it was coined by the author Nikolai Gogol and the literary critic Vissarion Belinskii (Williams 1970: 573).³⁷ It was subsequently adopted by writers such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, becoming a permanent and important feature of the Russian cultural milieu. The Serbian version of the title, however, is, obviously, different. *Izveštaj o slovenskoj duši* translates as 'the report on the Slavic soul'. There are two clear differences. Firstly, the word 'report' does not feature in the English title, and secondly, the adjective 'Russian' gave way to 'Slavic'.

As per our previous discussions, Serbs are Slavic, Orthodox and feel closely related to Russians. So closely, in fact, that they see the concept of the 'Russian soul' as their own. To include themselves in this cultural concept they rebranded it as the 'Slavic soul'. In the Serbian language 'Russian soul' has no specific meaning at all. It might as well be the English, Austrian or Japanese soul. The precise rendering of the concept is 'Slavic soul,' including, therefore, the Serbs.

³⁷Williams, Robe

The early versions of the English text featured the word “report” in the title. The “report” in question is the one that the young British analyst, Dudley-Vernon brings to the attention of Jack Sailgood in his Moscow office. One of the first readers of my novel was the famed London-based literary agent, Darley Anderson (represents Leed Childs among others) who suggested that a shorter version of the title would be catchier. Given his vast experience in these matters, I decided to follow his advice. In the Serbian version, however, I kept the word “izveštaj” (report). There are two reasons for this. Firstly, a title such as Slavic soul would, in Serbian, sound unremarkable and stereotyped. Secondly, the very existence of a bureaucratic script, of a report about a soul is in clear contrast with the very essence of the notion of the Slavic soul and its mysterious, esoteric essence. Within the Serbian cultural framework, one cannot possibly produce a report, a formal document on metaphysical occurrences. The Serbian title, therefore, juxtaposes two very different worldviews. That of the practical, materialistic West and that of the spiritual, transcendental and, of course, mysterious East. Such a clear-cut, Manichean division does not represent necessarily, my own views but those the general Serbian population. The words ‘report’ and “soul” featured in the same sentence are a contradiction that, most readers will, hopefully, correctly understand as ironic. In fact, the very plot of the novel and the race for the possession of a “soul” is ironic. The Russian Soul, the jewel, is just a metaphor for the human attributes that cannot be sold, bought or indeed, stolen as it happens in the novel.

5.4 How do I see my own practice of self-translation?

I speak Serbian at home and use English for professional academic purposes and I teach Italian at university level. My daily reality is multilingual, and the co-existence of these languages is a simple fact of life. I published literary and academic texts in all three languages and some of these in multiple versions too.

This specific writing project is the first one where I set out to write a story, a novel in two languages. This writing effort could be viewed as translingual writing or as an act of self-translation. For the purpose of this specific sub-chapter and my own practice, I would define translingual writing as the writing of different texts in different languages and/or genres. I typically write academic papers and professional reports in English and essays and short

stories in Serbian. In this case, however, I operate within the same narrative framework – a novel. The plot of the novel and the characters are the same in both versions. Theoretically speaking, I should be able to speak of a hypotext and a hypertext, of a first and second version. I wrote the first draft of the novel in Serbian. I then wrote the English version and changed, in the process, the plot, characterisation and narrative style, among other details. Upon completion of the English draft, I returned to the Serbian and then continued going back and forth many times in the best tradition of what I described earlier as an open text situation. Both versions were open and readily available for alterations.

The question I would like to address at this point, is how are the two texts different and most importantly why? I explored the first part of this question to some degree in the works of the authors in this study. The second part I could not as Ferré had passed away and Duranti is of an advanced age and hasn't been available for an interview. Goldsworthy, on the other hand, maintains that her second, Serbian text is a faithful translation. So, the only author in this context who claims to have re-written or co-written the versions of their novels and who can be questioned about their intentions is me.

There are instances, scenes in my two texts that are very comparable and where I did not make any efforts to alter the text. They, however, elicit, I am convinced, different reactions from the reader. There are also other instances where, in order to produce a comparable impact on the reader, I modified the text.

An example of the first kind would be the scene in the Kaganov house during the meeting of Milla Ivanovna with her British and Mexican business partners. Talking to Lord Mintbatten, the Russian is very critical of the role of the British in past historical and political matters while Mintbatten insists on law and order advocating the enforcement of a firm societal structure and praising the virtues of the kind of education that the British public schools offer.³⁸ The British reader, it is my expectation, views this dialogue as the expression of the specific points of views of two characters. The Serbian reader feels, at the same time, that Milla Ivanovna, although perhaps not a very likeable character, speaks up to power the Slavic mind. Mintbatten is seen as a typical privileged Britton. What in the English text is seen as his personal, or his class' statement, in Serbian reflects a cliché, 'something we all

³⁸ These are fee paying, independent schools. In North America and Australia, they are called 'private' schools.

know about the English.’ This brings me as a writer in the uncomfortable position where my characters appear to be too predictable and ordinary.

In the same scene at the Kaganov house, the Mexican drug lord, El Guapo Medina is introduced to Mintbatten:

Medina sat in an armchair and Mintbatten back on the couch. ‘This is my consigliere,’ said Medina making a gesture towards Ituribe who was barely visible among the large cushions and who was in the act of taking a silver cigarette holder out of his pocket. Abogado nodded, lifted the lid of the holder and offered its content to Lord Mintbatten who was sitting on the couch.

‘No, thank you,’ declined the Lord politely. It crossed his mind that these Mexicans must have some real, good stuff but the formal nature of the occasion called for self-restraint. (*The Russian Soul* 188)

There are three characters in this scene: Lord Mintbatten, El Guapo Medina and Ituribe. There are no explicit references to Mintbatten’s private life or sexual preference. The conversation is civil and appropriate for this social occasion. In the Serbian version, however, El Guapo, a super-macho street hustler without any education or scruples notices Mintbatten’s somewhat unusual demeanour (unusual to El Guapo), turns to Ituribe and says in very rapid nearly unintelligible, colloquial Spanish:

‘Sa ovim kao da nešto nije u redu. Jel’ se i tebi tako čini?’ promrmlja na španskom El Guapo sve zagledajući Mintbatena.

‘Da,’ uzvratí Ituribe pošto je i sam dobro odmerio lorda.

‘Mora da je peder, kad ti kažem,’ reče El Guapo. ‘Svi su oni pederi ove ili one vrste’.

‘Naravno,’ složi se Ituribe vadeći srebrnu tabakeru iz džepa.⁸

This short exchange does not feature at all in the English text. From the author’s (my) point of view, this dialogue is necessary for the characterisation of El Guapo. He is uneducated, violent, and completely unaccustomed to the western standards of polite behaviour and contemporary political correctness. He is also very virile and openly dislikes, in his own micro-world, any other kind of sexual or for that matter any other preference that does not match his own. The exchange can be translated as follows:

‘Something is wrong with this guy, don’t you think?’ murmured in Spanish El Guapo, observing attentively Mintbatten.

‘Yes, I do,’ replied Ituribe, glancing at the Lord.

‘He must be a faggot, I am telling you,’ said El Guapo. ‘They are all faggots. Of this or that kind but all faggots!’

‘Of course, they are,’ agreed Ituribe, taking the silver cigarette holder out of his pocket.

The Serbian readership expects El Guapo to use colourful vocabulary and display intolerance. After all, he has been introduced as a criminal who comes out of the Mexican desert to take care of business in one of the world's most prestigious cities – London. The passage, however, does not feature in the English text not because I, as the author, was afraid of my character being blasphemous and/or politically incorrect, but because I thought that my English reader would be side-tracked, thrown off balance by this dialogue and would lose sight of the bigger picture unfolding. And since this is one of the more important scenes in the novel it was important for me to focus the reader’s attention to the evolving plot rather than the characters’ or the author’s, political correctness. El Guapo’s premonition will be vindicated in the following chapter though (both texts), when we learn that Mintbatten is in a gay relationship with his health guru Antonio.

I see the act of writing in two languages simultaneously, or consecutively, as an act of communication with specific audiences. In the case of English, that is not a North American or South African audience but specifically the British audience with all its traits, as I understand them. Similarly, I communicate with an educated Serbian urban audience that I am familiar with. I would describe this process as creative re-writing. I have a visual imagination. Scenes, characters and events unfold in front of my inner eyes and I express these sensations using different linguistic conventions. Self-translation would require me to move from one text to the other.⁹ I do so to return the path that leads to the original ‘image.’ It is this ‘image’ then, that finds its verbal expression to convey a specific content to the target reader.

5.5 In this context, what is the original?

I wrote the first draft of the novel in Serbian. The English version followed shortly. Some parts of the English text were written before the Serbian draft was completed. I then started to work on the English version and all alterations were made on this text. Once I realised that for the submission of this thesis, I only needed the English text, I focused on the English and sporadically made changes to the Serbian text. If the basic criteria for establishing which text is the original were temporary and completion the norm, the English text would hold primacy. The first text ever written – not completed – though, had been the Serbian.

The Serbian text is nearly ten thousand words longer. Due to the synthetic nature of the Serbian and the analytic nature of the English language, one would expect the English text to be longer. For comparison, the literature study *Granice realizma u svetskoj kniževnosti* (Kvas 2016) has been translated into English – *The Boundaries of Realism in World Literature* (Kvas 2019). The Serbian text count is sixty-eight thousand words while the English translation is ninety-five thousand. A comparable analysis of the two texts shows that no alterations were made to the English text. We can, therefore, attribute the vast difference in the number of words (thirty per cent) to the synthetic nature of the Serbian and analytic of the English languages.

Following this linguistic criterion, the English version of my novel should be longer. But it is not. The superior length of the Serbian text is the direct result of a difference in narrative approach and style. The English text is more compact due to the ‘show, don’t tell’ approach that requires the characters to perform the action and express their views with as little background comment from the author as possible. The Serbian reader, however, expects to hear a more authoritative and dependable voice that can be relied upon to offer explanations, clarifications and additional background stories.

One such embedded, background story is the one of Milla Ivanovna. The English text introduces Kaganov’s wife with a very brief passage:

Now in her mid-thirties, her presence still commanded attention and respect. Her posture was firmly upright, her movements graceful and her Russian accent most often described as charming. Milla Ivanovna’s secret weapon though, was the penetrating gaze of her green eyes and the ability to scan with a minimal margin of error any man, woman or child who would find themselves crossing her path. As a Georgian businessman once put it, ‘her gaze has the same effect on men as the headlights of a car have on a rabbit standing in the middle of the road – admiration,

terror and ultimately, destruction.’ Unlike the average BMW, though, Milla Ivanovna knew how to choose her rabbits. (*The Russian Soul* 159)

Henceforth, the development of the Milla Ivanovna character is rendered through her actions and dialogues following the English preferred narrative style with special reference to the genre of thrillers and crime fiction in general. The Serbian text, however, features nearly three pages, or some eight hundred words, of description of Milla Ivanovna’s upbringing in St Petersburg, her family and the years spent at the Vaganova ballet academy, her escape from the oppressive boarding school and her subsequent love adventures. The Serbian version features a narrative voice and style the Serbian reader expects and is accustomed to. This voice is authoritative, dependable and the narrator is insightful.³⁹

To conclude, I am at my most comfortable thinking of these two texts as two originals. They are comparable, they are interwoven, and they communicate between themselves. I cannot claim that one of the two versions holds a higher degree of reality, aesthetic or creative value and ideally, I would like to see them published together in the same volume. Not necessarily as a single novel perhaps, as they are two novels, but as a single creative writing effort in the tradition of Lobina’s *Po cantu Biddanoa* and in line with Epstein’s stereo effect consideration.

³⁹ Unlike the post-modern unreliable narrator (Nünning 2005).

Conclusion

The specific aims of the present study are to investigate whether distinct boundaries between translation and writing and the privileged status of the ‘original’ are useful in relation to the practice of self-translation. The study also aims at clarifying the nature of my own translingual literary practice with special reference to the re-writing of my novel, *The Russian Soul*.

I wrote *The Russian Soul / Izveštaj o slovenskoj duši* in a consecutive fashion going back and forth many times between the two texts. In doing so, I lost track of which section or which scene I wrote in what language first. At the end of the writing process, however, I do not think it matters. Both languages are part of my reality and my preferred form of expression is bi-lingual. I self-translated and re-wrote, what I perceive to be, one and the same text in two languages. The product of this process is a literary text accessible by both audiences. A text that gives me the right of a bi-cultural ‘citizenship’.

To achieve the aims of this study, I analysed the views and practice of Rosario Ferré, Francesca Duranti, Vesna Goldsworthy and my own. I found that each author approached self-translation for different reasons and that their understanding of the practice varies considerably.

Before I proceed to answer the research questions, I will address the theoretical issues discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the practice of self-translation. The bi-cultural and bi-lingual situation of all three authors requires their work to be considered within the broad cultural context they operate within. While their languages, circumstances and motivation may differ, their work cannot be dissociated from the relevant cultural framework.

Ferré, Duranti and Radić assert that their self-translation work is to be viewed as re-writing, a continuation of writing the first text. They claim, and scholars agree, that part and parcel of this process is the modification and amplification of their ideas. The reasons for this modification of the first text can be classified in two groups. Firstly, the authors seek to better

express their views and meet the expectations of the new target audience. Secondly, the passage of time exerts its own natural influence.

Goldsworthy, on the other hand, maintains that she ‘translated’ her work. While we can accept her claim, this does not mean that her procedure or indeed its product, the second text, are in any way of a different degree of aesthetic or any other merit than the works of Ferré, Duranti and Radić. However, what does transpire from the interviews Goldsworthy gave on several occasions is that she sees herself as a British author who translates into Serbian. This might appear as a contradiction since she wrote poetry simultaneously in the two languages and established her bi-lingual, translingual and self-translation ‘poetic’ profile. As per our previous discussion though, she did publish poetry in Serbian *before* moving to Britain but her career as novelist originated later in life and in English. The self-translation of her own prose does not seem to have deeper, identity-building connotations as in the cases of Ferré, Duranti and Radić. Goldsworthy belongs to two different communities but in different ways. The poet is part-Serbian while the novelist is anchored within the English language and British culture. For Ferré, Duranti and Radić, however, self-translation holds an intimate and existential meaning. Ferré needed to articulate her position within the Spanish and English languages and the cultural and political *milieu* of her two countries while Duranti engaged in the process in order to build and establish a bilingual and bi-cultural credential that she craved. Radić, on the other hand, sees self-translation and re-writing as a natural expression of his bilingual and multicultural position.

Of the three authors, only Radić considered creating a ‘stereo effect’ for a possible bilingual audience. Goldsworthy mentions that she expected some of her readers to access both versions. Nonetheless, she insists that she did not modify or adapt her second text.

The chronophagous nature of self-translation is visible in the works of two of the three authors. While Ferré and Radić seem to have produced her two texts in a rather effortless fashion, Duranti found the production of the English text so demanding that she had to postpone the publication of the second text for four years. Goldsworthy, on the other hand, found the self-translation of fiction (not of poetry) to be time-consuming and laments that she could have dedicated her time to writing a new novel.

This ‘temporal’ aspect of consecutive self-translation influenced in different ways the extent of modifications and amplifications introduced in the second text. In the cases of Ferré,

Duranti and Radić so that they continued to (re-)write the first text, and in the case of Goldsworthy so that she felt she was performing a chore rather than being involved in a creative activity. It must also be noted that none of the three first texts were ‘open’ at the time of writing the second text so no modification could have been done on the first text.⁴⁰

My first research question focused on the authors’ views on their self-translation practice. All three authors write in English and one important feature of English language literary production is the significant power of its market (British Council 2013). This is by far the largest and most powerful literary market in the world and it is important for an author to be present on it. Such a presence, however, can be achieved by having a novel rendered into English by a professional translator, for instance. The marketing rationale on its own therefore, cannot fully explain the motivation for (re-)writing in English.

Ferré is acutely aware of the power of the American market and her own bi-cultural position while Goldsworthy considers herself to be an English author. However, in three of the cases I looked at (Ferré, Duranti and Radić) the motivation to self-translate came as the result of a creative impulse and a strong desire to communicate with an audience as well as to articulate and build one’s own multi-cultural identity. Such an internal process can be initiated because the author wants to reconnect with their source culture, their original country and community as in the cases of Ferré or because they want to build, articulate and establish a bilingual, bicultural identity as in the case of Duranti and Radić.

In the words of the authors, Ferré, Duranti and Radić ‘re-write’ and Goldsworthy ‘translates’ into their respective mother tongues. Ferré, Duranti and Radić open the communication channels within the given linguistic and cultural matrix by extending the creative writing process into self-translation. Goldsworthy, on the other hand, describes her practice as ‘translation’ that she differentiates from both ‘re-writing’ and ‘creative writing’ (of the first text, the ‘original’). This is however, as per our previous discussion, her personal view and only a close analysis of the texts that is beyond the scope of this study might give us a more definite answer in terms of aesthetic or creative merits.

A self-translation process can also focus on the articulation and establishment of a new bi-cultural and bilingual identity as in the case of Duranti. Her command (or lack of it)

⁴⁰ They could have opted, of course, to publish an edited new version of the first text. But this ‘second’ first text would, by definition, be modified and, therefore, different from the first text.

of the English language delayed her planned simultaneous writing of the two texts and she had to rely on the help of collaborators. While the production of the English text was delayed, this did not adversely affect Duranti's desire to establish herself as a monolithic Italo-American, bi-cultural and bilingual person and author.

My second research question focused on the status of the original within this given context. Rosario Ferré asserts and critics agree that both versions of her novel are authoritative and do not comply with the dichotomy of the original – translation. These texts were 'perpetuated' and while the chronologically second text cannot be said to represent a 'creation' of the same scope as the first text, it cannot be understood and classified as a translation either.

Duranti clearly stated that the aim of her self-translation activity was to write a 'different book.' She attempted to re-write the text within a new linguistic and cultural paradigm. For her, this was a significant identity-building process. In this case too, it can be argued that for the understanding of these texts either individually or together, the dichotomy between original and translation is unhelpful.

Goldsworthy did not set out to re-write her text. In her own words, she 'translated' *Gorsky*. It could be argued that the fact that her intention was to 'translate' rather than to 're-write' does not mean that her approach is radically different from Ferré's and Duranti's. By opting to 'translate', however, she does acknowledge the authority of the first, English text and in doing so she adheres to the dichotomy original – translation. And eventually, Radić asserts that he would like to see his text(s) presented in a bilingual edition ready to induce a stereo-effect (Epstein).

Ferré, Duranti, Goldsworthy and Radić approach their practice differently and for different reasons. They use different terminologies to describe their experience and intentions. It is possible, however, that all three are describing one and the same pluri-faceted, wide-ranging creative writing phenomenon that we can broadly term 'self-translation.'

The translation scholar Cecilia Rossi argues that '... a text cannot be rendered in another language without foregrounding the idea of translation as a creative rewriting...' (Rossi 2018: 381). According to Rossi, therefore, the act of literary translation is *per se* a creative act and produces a text with a degree of authenticity that complements rather than simply mirrors the 'original.' If so, the practice of self-translation can produce two texts of

comparable creative authority. When such texts are produced simultaneously, as in the case of Beckett, both are ‘originals’ and they complement one another. There can be, therefore, two originals, or one single original in two languages. Either way, such texts do not comply with the dichotomy original – translation. The production of these texts in a consecutive fashion offers a new range of ‘possibilities’ (Wilson 2009: 197) that also do not fall neatly within the customary categorisation.

While self-translation is not a modern phenomenon it has recently caught the attention of scholars and the imagination of authors (Hokenson and Munson 2007/14: 1). The advent of globalisation that is typified by improved telecommunication capacities and enhanced movement of people create conditions for an ever-greater number of multilingual individuals and, therefore, multilingual authors which is the first pre-condition for multilingual creative writing. Multilingual writers are able to, and many do, engage in self-translation, an activity that mirrors their human condition of being, existing, communicating between (among) languages and cultures and of becoming what Cronin calls ‘translated beings’ that are capable of moving back and forth between the source and target language and culture (2006: 45).

Kellman asserts that to understand a multilingual author such as the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa, we must take into consideration the total sum of his creations, a process complicated by the refusal of the poet to bind himself to one language or style (Kellman 2000: 34). A natural creative writing mode of expression of a ‘translated being’ is multilingual, and that is best articulated through a trans-lingual or self-translation practice. Authors that occupy diverse cultural and linguistic spaces cannot fully externalise and articulate such ‘selves’ when restricted to only one such space and mode of communication (language, culture). A self-translating author can, therefore, only be read and understood in their full multilingual complexity and any analysis that considers their output in one language only lessens the power and reach of their intended artistic scope. To take this argument further, a model reader of such a multilingual author should be multilingual her/himself with the same combination of languages and a comparable cultural experience. Such a multilingual proposition advances the case of stereo self-translations written that intentionally explore the no man’s land between (or among) languages and cultures.

Self-translation can be viewed therefore, as a metaphor for the global multi-layered multi-cultural and multilingual self. Such a ‘translated’ individual self-translates in order to

explore opportunities for belonging to a new culture and for building a new identity, as Duranti does, or to reconnect with their source culture and language as is the case with Ferré and to some extent with Goldsworthy and Radić.

In terms of self-translation as an identity-building activity, we cannot infer, based on the present research, that any one of these three authors belong in any way to one culture more than to the another. Duranti might have found the production of her self-translation challenging but the English text bears witness to her adoption of the new language and culture. We equally cannot, therefore, claim that any one of the two texts in question is more original than the other. This investigation confirms the previously cited theoretical postulates of Ette, Bassnett and Wilson that within the framework of literary self-translation, the dichotomy original/translation is inadequate – ‘simplistic’ and ‘unhelpful’. Such a dichotomy represents a blunt tool that is not suitable to approaching in a constructive manner the nuances of self-translated texts: the relative irrelevance of the chronological order in which the texts appear, the role of the author’s intentions, their linguistic prowess and cultural bonds as well as the nature of their talent and drive to communicate effectively with different audiences.

Self-translation brings together, therefore, the first and second text into a meaningful multilingual creative whole that can articulate a multicultural position. This literary practice occupies a niche space between the fields of literary and translation studies and can be regarded as an activity *sui generis*, distinct from both creative writing and translation as it asserts itself as the literary vehicle of choice for the articulation of the quest for identity and citizenship of ‘translated’ people.

To answer my initial questions about the nature of my own literary practice, I conclude that multilingual authors and ‘translated’ people are entitled to a ‘global’ literary modus operandi in diverse languages, within varied cultures that is directed to different audiences without being pigeonholed into national, regional or local literatures or sub-divided between the scholarly fields of literary and translation studies. Self-translation offers, therefore, the ‘possibility’ of a global literary citizenship and in that respect, my English and Serbian novels allow me to stand simultaneously, both within the cultural spaces of these languages and outside of them in a new, autochthonous realm that is mapped by overlapping languages and identities.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview with Vesna Goldsworthy

NR: Could you tell me about your writing background?

VG: The first thing that comes to mind in relation to my writing is the diversity of genre. The second are the different voices that one needs in order to write in these different genres. And in relation to your object of study, it is of particular importance that the genres I write in have changed with the length of my time in Britain and the improvements in my English. When I came to this country, I spoke English well enough to get a full-time job, to function in it, even to get a job in publishing, although unusually that job was more dependent on my knowledge of Latin than on my knowledge of English

Did you study English formally?

I do not have a degree in English. I graduated in Yugoslav and comparative literature from the University of Belgrade, and I took a two-year module in English language as part of that degree, but my case is not like that of the novelist Aleksandar Hemon who has a degree in English. This was very much an optional course. When I arrived in the UK, my English was reasonably good. Before university, I studied English at school three hours a week. I still keep my correspondence with my husband-to-be and my English-speaking friends from the early eighties, and I see now that my English was nowhere near as good as I then thought it was. It was what I'd call a functional foreigner's English. I made a lot of mistakes, particularly, as I think all Serbs do, when it comes to the use of articles. We don't have them in our native tongue, so there is no natural feeling for them.

When did you come to England?

In 1986 officially, but between 84 and 86 I was, in practice, living between two places.

And you communicated with your husband in English?

Yes. He speaks Bulgarian, he understands Serbian, but yes we spoke English.

So, from 86 on English was your main language.

Yes, absolutely. English was my main spoken and written language, but until 92 or 93 my creative writing was still all in Serbian. I still used to publish things in Belgrade, poetry in Serbian mainly, also book reviews, and at that stage I would not have thought of creative writing as an option for me in English.

When you wrote the Angel of Salonika - you wrote that in English? Is there a first text?

No, there isn't. What I am going to say very briefly here, is that my writing in English starts with journalism, then continues with academic writing. Only in the early 2000s, i.e. fifteen years ago, did I start writing creatively in English. My memoir, Chernobyl Strawberries, was the first creative work written entirely in English. It was translated into Serbian by someone else...

Why?

That is a very good question. Because I thought I was dying and I wanted to write that book as quickly as I could. I wanted to write it for my son. I was completely convinced that, if I were no longer living, he would forget even the little bit of Serbian that I thought him... When I started it I had no idea that the memoir would be published, it was a kind of notebook for him. I started writing in English and what I realised was that my English voice was absolutely up to the task. Even five years previously I wouldn't have thought that. What I also realised was that there was a simultaneous process of implicit translation underway. Translation means bringing over: I was translating – bringing over -- my Serbian life into English and that was a creative act in itself. If you are writing about a SLET, for example, the celebration of Tito's birthday on 25th May, half the words you need to describe such an event don't exist immediately in English, so there is an implicit act of translation and that was finally part of the fun in writing Chernobyl Strawberries. My type of bilingualism, if you want to call it that, is gradually acquired and not something that you are brought up with. In some ways, it remains diachronic, successive, in that whole layers of your life exist in one language or the other, and they don't always compute. My example for that kind of consecutive bilingualism is that I learned to drive in this country: if you open the hub, all the internal car parts I know in English while all external parts I know only in Serbian (or in German, for most Serbian words for car parts are German loan words). You have to wed those two worlds, those two periods. CS was therefore a kind of implicit translation of my Serbian life into English. The Angel of Salonika was deliberately written translingually. This was quite a deliberate process of writing at the same time in two languages.

What do you mean by “the same time”?

Before I forget, let me mention that I have had to ensure that both editions -- Serbian and English -- have the ISBN numbers as originals, not as translation. This was not easy, because this is quite new, a new process for publishers. What I mean by the "same time" is that, if I started a poem and the first line came to me in Serbian, I immediately created an English equivalent, or vice versa. For example, there was a poem about Icarus which starts with a drop of red wax on someone's shoulder -- that line came to me in Serbian -- I immediately translated the verse into English and I would not move further with the poem unless each line was working in both languages. It was, in a way, a simultaneous translation. It was a deliberate process; I can't guarantee that was the case for every poem but it was for most...

So, you wouldn't finish one poem in Serbian say, and then attempt to complete it in English?

No, no, I worked on them step by step. It was on purpose, part of the experiment. I am not saying that was the case for every poem.

When you were writing the *Strawberries* you have a target audience in mind. How did it work with *Angel*, where you talking to someone?

Poetry comes from a different place. It is a bit like composing music I think. You carry certain images, and because they are static, they do not move like stories, they keep coming back to you and they gradually coalesce into poems. I have written poetry all my life. The poems from the *Angel* were accumulating in a drawer, and I was experimenting. The collection came gradually together. I was beginning to feel that I needed to publish something, and I felt that perhaps there was enough to put a collection together and publish a book.

Would you say that you were trying to articulate these images in different languages?

Yes, I would. People say you are writing in different genres - I sometimes joke that it is only so that no-one notices that I'm writing about the same thing again and again. *Inventing Ruritania* and the *Angel* complement each other as projects. Just as in *Gorsky* I am obsessing about Russia in some ways, what happened with the *Angel* is that the whole of the Balkans came together. Greece became part of my home land. There is a kind of re-thinking -- broadening -- of the world I came from there and part of the joy of writing in both in Serbian and in English is that thinking could be carried through these languages, particularly some of the vocabulary that relates to religion: monasteries, ikons, church services etc. These are words that I haven't used since my twenties ...it is like revisiting Byzantium and playing with languages was part of that return.

How do you construct your identity?

Vis-à-vis language or...?

Vis-à-vis languages and these images. Because now you have brought in Greece, Russia, the Balkans, we are in England... how does it work?

It's quite a funny thing...there is a way in which the institutional system forces you to articulate your identity. I always thought it funny when the British Council sent me abroad as a British writer – in Poland and Germany, for example, I was part of a series of talks called The New British Voices -- so I was a British voice, yet everyone who came to my reading kept asking about Serbia as I was clearly Serbian. They would send TV crews to interview me about Serbian politics. When I read my work here in Britain I am always introduced as Serbian. My Wikipedia entry, for example, says that I am a Serbian writer... When I go to Serbia, however, I am always officially a British writer. I suspect that is because I thereby increase the number of nations that are represented at any event. I opened the book fair in Belgrade in 2005, for example, in the name of Britain which was that year the guest of honour. I was invited to represent Britain. The comic side to the event was that I was asked to read my welcoming speech in English. I was supposedly a British writer and everyone seemed pleased with that. They even had the actress Ana Sofrenović to read the translation in Serbian. You can imagine the game of mirrors. The following day Serbian tabloids asked, quite rightly: what was she thinking reading in English? Yet the language was not chosen by me, but by the organisers. I always say that I am Anglo-Serbian because I like the idea. British-Serbian does not appeal to me as much.

Could you tell me about your linguistic background?

So, I started learning English when I was seven but at a very slow rate. At the same time, I started learning French much more intensively, and I went to a French school. French was formally my first foreign language and for a long time it was my better language. When I came to Britain, my French was much stronger than my English. My British publications now say that I write in my third language. That is formally true, but in terms how good these languages are, my English is now much better than my French.

The writing of Gorsky - how did it happen?

I had toyed with the idea for probably the best part of ten years, since 2003 or 4. I mean the idea of writing a novel about Russians in London. My first inspiration was *Roman o Londonu* (Crnjanski). I wanted to write about Russian oligarchs because that had a strong

resonance: stories about them were everywhere. There was also a degree of fear. What do I really know about oligarchs. I didn't really want to research their lives, I wanted to write from imagination. The *Gatsby* aspect started invading my thoughts. I have these disjointed memories, probably from 2010, of looking at a postcard of a Caspar Friedrich painting, the man looking at the sea. I remember imagining that man turning towards me, in a Gatsby-esque gesture. A solitary man, the sea, the green light. It was almost as though I was thinking about a poem. I'd never have thought I would be brave or foolish enough to re-write *Gatsby*. I had this idea that I could write about different groups of East European immigrants in London: you have the Serbs, the Bulgarians, the Poles as well as the Russians. Although I had it all planned long before, I actually started writing the novel after watching, for some five hours, the Djokovic-Del Potro match at Wimbledon in 2013. My husband and my son were hiking in Scotland. I was home alone. I spent five hours watching tennis and I thought I'm going to waste another summer just dreaming about this *Gatsby* story. I had all the notes, and even Gorsky was already there (the sound of the name is similar to *Gatsby*). So I sat down to write the first chapter and I wrote something like 6,000 words that evening. I didn't even move. I wrote the first draft in something like three weeks. I didn't re-read *Gatsby*, I just took a plunge, almost like writing a poem. I had a friend who was working for a Russian oligarch and I started from a certain number of real images - but everything came in a flood. The first draft was 45,000 words long which is almost exactly the length of *Gatsby* and it took me three weeks. People hate it when writers say I did this in 3 weeks and look how lovely the book is, but in fact, the second draft took about eighteen months.

Why Russians, why not Iranians?

I think you must know, but let's try to explain for the record. Part of the way in which your mind works when you move away from your homeland is to see the broadening of the spiritual space that represents the homeland of your imagination. So, when I first came to London, in the late 80s, I knew relatively few Serbs. The younger generation from the 1990s was still not here - my alternative homeland was the world of Ashkenazi Jews in North London. I listened to their music, read their writings and I now have a lot of friends in those circles. Russia, Greece, the wider Slavonic and Orthodox worlds played a similar role. I taught myself Russian in this country, because I could not face reading the Russians in English translation. We could say that the Russian world has a meaning, it is another self that I feel I could belong to. It's a hazy concept, not something precise... and it is not political, it is very cultural. We were just talking about Orthodoxy and Byzantium. Again, it is not religious, it's cultural. I became more aware of the world I came from, the big overlapping cultures which meet in it. And it is not just Slavdom or Eastern Europe. I am going on a mad tangent here, but there's a part of Berlin which is more like Belgrade I grew up in than Belgrade is now because Belgrade has changed so much. It's Schlachtensee, south-west Berlin and it's very much like Senjak and Dedinje of my childhood. Even the

pavements are like the pavements in Belgrade in the sixties. In the 20s and 30s, the built environment of Belgrade was influenced by Central Europe and Germany. So, I feel at home in the built environment of Central Europe just as I feel at home in the patisseries and restaurants of Central Europe. But I feel at home in Russian literature because it is connected to Serbian literature in particular, which means a lot to me. So, this is all cultural... there is no great mystery to it.
All these worlds meet in *Gorsky* and in London...

Gorsky came about in English first, right?

Yes, totally! It was written in English and then I translated it into Serbian.

When did you translate it?

I translated it into Serbian in January... it was published in English in April 2015, and I translated it in December 2014 and January 2015.

So, the English version was already out?

It was out of my hands. I translated it into Serbian from bound proofs. It wasn't yet officially published in English but it was too late to change anything.

You had no power over the text, so that was the original.

That was the original, absolutely!

Would you describe your procedure as translation?

Yes, absolutely - self-translation.

That is different from the *Angel*...

Completely different and it is also the first longer piece of work that I translated into Serbian myself, a work of mine that is. I translated other writers before. It was a difficult, painful process and it took quite a long time.

When you say painful, which aspect did you find painful?

The aspect I found painful was that -- unlike with the *Angel of Salonika* where I wouldn't even try something in English if it didn't work in Serbian -- here the text was already there

in English so I had to find a way of translating it. I wanted to create a faithful translation, not a rewrite, and I realised that, particularly in material ways, in ways related to objects, there were parts of my English vocabulary that were not exercised in Serbian for very many years. I had to find Serbian words for a lot of things. I also had to make a lot of decisions related to the fact that Nick is a Serb who emigrated to London in the 1990s. What kind of Serbian would he be speaking? I had to decide with characters he would be addressing with 'vi' and which with 'ti'. I had long exchanges with my German translator who was working on it at the same time and we even had differences over those issues...

For example, I thought that Nick would at no point say 'ti'⁴¹ to Gorsky. Whereas she had identified the point at which they become closer and where Nick uses the informal you. So, those kinds of decisions... in that sense I was a translator just as much as she was.

Where you tempted to change the character of Gorsky, or Nick or... changing the relationship, or anything of 'substance'?

Muharem Bazdulj in his review in *Vreme*, noticed an element that I was thinking about very, very, hard: the moment at which Nick's own Serbian becomes frozen in time. For instance, I decided that Nick would not say 'EsEmEs' in Serbian for a text message on his mobile phone but that he would call it a 'text' because all of us Serbs in London call it that. That's how we speak, right? So, I decided that would be appropriate for Nick but then I really worried that everyone who reads it in Serbian would think that I forgot the actual Serbian word! I was aware not only of Belgrade Serbian, not that I am perfect in it, and I was also aware of the way Serbs in London speak Serbian, as you and I do when we speak Serbian.

And that is something that does not necessarily show in English!

Yes, yes...

It just transpires here that you have a readership who is attentive to these details.

Yes, and I feared that they would read every discrepancy as my error.

I found one detail along these lines, for instance when Nick is thinking about the way he is described at home he uses the term 'pobegulja'. So, that is a Serbian word, translated into English and then re-translated back into Serbian.

⁴¹ Serbian informal for "you".

Yes, exactly! And there was lots of this kind of thing in *Chernobyl Strawberries* but I didn't have to worry about it. Whereas here, as I was translating, I worried. And actually, I wondered whether I would be better off with someone else translating. But I enjoyed the work.

You see, that is one case where a professional translator might translate it differently.

Yes, and with *Chernobyl Strawberries*, I had in Zia Gluhbegović a good translator... I am not really sure, I have never thought about the process and its results. But I noticed that the words she used in her Serbian are not necessarily the words I would use, even when they were correct. I can't remember, there was a different word for a particular flower, a synonym, and I just thought that's not me!

Reading Francesca Duranti, for instance, I thought it was an interesting statement of her intentions... in the first sentence in Italian, I can only presume this is the first version, she says 'mi hanno detto', which is a past tense, they told me. But in English, suddenly, that's the beginning of the novel, she writes 'they say'. I thought, ok, this is a statement of intent from my point of view as a researcher working on these two texts. So, what is she telling me here? She is telling me that she will 're-write' pieces that she doesn't like, that she will approach the text from a different angle, that she has the license to do things to the text. Have you ever found yourself in such a tempting situation?

I was endlessly tempted but I also felt, and this may be me and my character, I also thought that people would read the book in both languages. I know personally a number of people who've read both versions. And I had lots of e-mails after *Chernobyl Strawberries* from people complaining about this and that in the translation and although the translation wasn't mine, they assumed that I had translated it. And here I thought, if I started changing things, I would be dealing with endless correspondence. So, I tried to be... faithful, I tried to stick to my original text, to resist...

In terms of translations?

Yes, I tried to make it a translation and not use my authorial license... There are maybe a few places where I used my prerogative as a writer to change something. But those things were really small. I changed the wording in a few places where, had I not changed it, I would require a footnote. A translator would do that, insert a footnote. Yes, as far as I remember, that's the sum of it... I could even go through the novel and find those instances but... they are very small.

How did Fitzgerald's style influence your writing? Is there anything that you picked up consciously or subconsciously... is there any reflection of his style in your way of writing or seeing the world in *Gorsky* with special reference to the two versions?

It's a fantastic question because all my favourite writers, the ones I like reading most, write in this melancholy, poetic style. Melancholy is my chosen mood... Crnjanski is a melancholy writer par excellence in Serbian. Fitzgerald is his equivalent in English, and yet when I first encountered the *Great Gatsby*, it was in Serbian. I have to say that, as I was then a teenager, the whole melody of Fitzgerald's language was completely lost. I wasn't aware of it. When I re-read it in English, at some stage in the 1990s, I don't remember when but I had to teach it, I was sort of forced to read it and I suddenly became aware of the poetry of its language. Maybe because I am a poet as well, I am aware of the sound... there is that kind of almost vibration that comes from the poetic language like Fitzgerald's. I wanted to achieve something like that in Nick's voice. If you read *Chernobyl Strawberries* there is that too. That's a characteristic of my voice overall perhaps... that, for someone who, I think, has a sense of humour and is fond of laughter more than anything else, I turn into someone who is rather melancholy when I write. That's what my muse is like: I joke about that in *Chernobyl Strawberries*. I wouldn't say that is how Fitzgerald influenced me, but the reason why I like Fitzgerald is because I write like that... It's the chicken and egg question. I was drawn to *Gatsby* because I write in that poetic key.

So, in the English you have the melancholy. Did it transpire in Serbian?

I hope so. What I wanted to achieve in Serbian but I honestly don't know if I did achieve it, because it was my first novel, is a distinctive voice. Because you don't get lots of reviews when you write in Serbian, or perhaps I don't get them and other writers do, I don't know how far that distinctive voice comes across. But I wanted to write something that is distinctly me... recognisable, so that if you open *Gorsky* randomly and even you don't know it's *Gorsky* but you know my work, you can tell it's me. I wanted that in Serbian too but whether I achieved it or not, I don't know.

Which version is the 'original'?

The English is the original!

How did you construct Nick's voice in English and then, in a sense, de-constructed it again, back into Serbian? It's an interesting process... English is for him a foreign language so you needed to construct this aspect of his identity and then de-coded somehow into...?

Well, when I started writing *Gorsky* I had already been, for the best part of ten years, a creative writing teacher. So, one of the things I knew from my teaching was this importance of a distinctive voice. Yet, I was also aware from my writing practice, and this might be relevant for your thesis, that when you are a writer writing in a language that is not your mother tongue, you have to be deeply aware of the register you can achieve, and proceed with caution. It's a bit like opera singers, are you a tenor or a soprano, can you actually achieve that high C. You learn that you can sing this song but not that song. When I was writing *Gorsky*, all this came in one piece. I had notes for the novel, where I had already written that my narrator shouldn't be English, that they should not be a native speaker. I wanted a foreigner to narrate the story because foreignness is closer to my voice, closer to my soul.

Is that the only reason?

Yes, it's within my comfort zone. I also wanted the story to be narrated by a man. If you are writing a love story like *Le Grand Meaulnes*, or Chekhov's *Kiss* for example... if you are writing a love story, a story of passion and doomed love, you can only narrate it from the point of view of an unreliable narrator who is not one of the lovers. Because sustaining that kind of love over 20,000 words, let alone 80,000, would be both too sentimental and improbable. So, I knew there would be the third party and I realised something about the mechanics of Fitzgerald's novel. I wanted the narrator to be a man because I cannot imagine any woman having the same relationship with *Gorsky* himself. I decided the narrator would be foreign because I am. But then I also decided that Nikola would have a PhD in English and that was a decision that was taken that first evening to enable me to write as fluently in English as I wanted.... do you see? I wanted to have it both ways.

And to understand the cultural code!

Yes, Nick understands both the Russians and the English. So, that was a kind of practical decision. Now, when I was facing the need to translate his voice into Serbian, in a sense I had to re-invent all of that. The fact that he is foreign no longer stands, the fact that he has a PhD in English presumably affects his Serbian, but how? I had a particular idea of what a Belgrade person is like, a young man from Belgrade. It may be almost a stereotypical thing. I made Nikola like that. It's actually quite funny because an English student here asked me - we were talking about the film version of *Gorsky* -- who would you like to play Nikola? And I said, just like that, James Franco. So, there was this idea of a shortish, dark haired, James Franco-ish Belgrade type who may be sitting in a particular café off Knez Mihajlova street and talking about the world, too clever for his own good. I heard Nick's voice.

So, you can see him?

Yes! I could see him and I could imagine him. And it's also very much a generational thing, in that sort of sense.

You gave him a surname that doesn't exist, does it?

Apparently, it does, but I only found out it does by Googling it.

It sounds a bit strange!

Yes, it sounds strange!

But you wanted it to sound strange?

Had I been thinking about translating the novel into Serbian I would have considered the names more seriously. But I came up with the names in the rush of that first draft and most of them remain because they were funny to me. Gorsky was there because it sounded like Gatsby, Natalia was there because I have a doll called Natalia, who is both lovely and very much like Natalia in the novel. Pekarova: that's predominantly a Czech name rather than Bulgarian (although it exists in Bulgaria). Her counterpart in Gatsby was called Baker (the same profession). Kimovicis Carraway, 'Kim' is the same spice.

And you kept it in Serbian?

I kept it in Serbian because... what do I do, I cannot now invent new names! But had I thought that I would be translating the novel myself, I could have called him something else, some other spice (laughs)... these were originally insider jokes for my own amusement.

So, you didn't have the intention to translate it from the outset?

No, no...

Why did you translate it? How did it come about?

I had a sabbatical and I wanted to see if I am up to the task of translating. I promised it to my Belgrade publisher, but had I known that it would take as long as it took, I might not have done it. Because it took me an awfully long time.

It took you more time to translate it than to write it?

Almost... certainly much more time than to write the first draft. I thought it was going to be a quick job but it wasn't, it was hard. I could have written several chapters of my new novel instead of translating the old one into Serbian.

So, what about the ISBN? Is it a translation or...?

Yes, it is a translation.

So, the *Angel* is two originals and *Gorsky* is one original and one translation?

Yes.

You think that's fair?

Yes, that's how it was written. The fact that I am its translator is not as important as the fact that it is a translation.

Interview conducted by Nebojša Radić, Norwich, 1 December 2017

APPENDIX 2

Nebojša Radić
PhD Student
16. October 2017



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Self-Translation and Re-writing

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – Professor Vesna Goldsworthy

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about self-translation and re-writing of literary texts. This phenomenon sits theoretically at the intersection between world literature and translation studies and this project promises to contribute to the further development of this field. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a bilingual author who engages in the practice of self-translation and /or translingual writing.

This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researchers:

- [Nebojša Radić, PhD student](#)

(3) What will the study involve for me?

You will be interviewed by NR twice. The interviews will take place in your office the UEA in Norwich and NR will ask you questions about your writing and self/translation practice.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

This will take up to 60 minutes of your time for each of the two interviews. A total of up to 120 minutes.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or any other university.

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time and your data will not be included in any publications. You can do this by contacting NR in writing via Email.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

Your responses are likely to provide an important insight in the rationale for and the very practice of self-translation. The other two authors I am looking at in this study, Rosario Ferré and Francesca Duranti, are not available to be interviewed which makes your participation very important. Should the study be published, that would represent an associated benefit for you through exposure to the wider professional and fiction readership.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 1998 Data Protection Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2013).

Your information will be stored securely and will only be disclosed with your permission, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, and you will be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Nebojsa will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. You can contact her on n.radic@uea.ac.uk or 07748795240

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

Yes, you will receive a copy of the study.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee. If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Nebojsa Radic
School of LLiterature, Drama and Creative Writing
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
n.radic@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Richard Andrews, at Richard.Andrews@uea.ac.uk.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to NR, the Researcher. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, **VESNA GOLDSWORTHY**., agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- ✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or any other individuals or institutions relating to your research now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.
- ✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that I will be identified in these publications.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES X NO



.....
Signature

VESNA GOLDSWORTHY
PRINT name
Vesna Goldsworthy

1 December 2017

The
Russian Soul

A novel by

Nebojša Radić

What would your good do if evil didn't exist, and what would the earth look like if all the shadows disappeared?

Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*

I

Senka Golovkin wore a white shirt and a dark blue tie. He sat in his large window seat with a bunch of papers in his hands and looked down at the thick, ominous clouds sitting between the aircraft and the Alps. Suddenly, the Lear jet encountered turbulence, shook, and took a dive. After a couple of uneasy moments, the plane steadied and continued en route to London. Beads of sweat appeared on Golovkin's forehead. With a shaky hand, he took a handkerchief out of his pocket.

'I'll tell you about the Russian Soul, Alex,' he said and wiped his face.

Earlier that evening Alex Gorsky walked out of the Casa di Santa Francesca Romana onto the narrow, cobbled street. It was dark and the cold rain was turning into snow. Further down the lane there was a lamp and a yellowish shop window next to which a big black car was waiting: engine running, headlights on. Two men stood next to the car. Kolya, the older man, had a shaved head, a beer belly and his tweed jacket seemed a couple of sizes too small. The shorter man had thin, crooked legs and wore a black woollen hat. He leant against the door on the passenger's side and kept shuffling his feet.

'*Privyet, Alex,*' said Kolya. Gorsky nodded and said with a heavy accent: '*Buona sera.*'

'*Sera,*' mumbled the young man.

'*Davai, davai,*' said Kolya, 'We are already late.'

'That's fine, you can always blame it on me,' said Gorsky. 'Take my bag and you two can go. I need to take care of some business in town and I'll join you later. Vatayev will be dining at Roma Sparita, I imagine. I'll find you there, right?'

'Yes,' said Kolya. 'He's a man of good taste and habits.'

‘What’s your business in town?’ said Kolya with a sly grin and a wink. ‘A woman? Yes, of course, I knew it. You go chasing chicks around Piazza di Spagna while I spend my time with this mute Sicilian.’

‘*Napolitano*,’ mumbled the young man, disproving both the assertions. Then he shrugged his shoulders, opened the door and got into the car.

‘Right,’ said Kolya and looked at the Italian as if surprised he could talk at all. He winked at Gorsky and shook his head as if to say, ‘He’s not really all there.’

‘The Boss rang and asked me to collect a parcel for him,’ said Gorsky. ‘Rest assured, no chicks around Piazza di Spagna for me tonight.’

‘Your gun’s in here?’ said Kolya, taking the bag from Gorsky and throwing it into the boot.

‘No,’ said Gorsky, ‘I’ve got it.’

‘OK.’ Kolya closed the door.

‘Catch you later. I’ll come straight to the hotel and you can then take me to the airport,’ said Gorsky and waved his hand at the Italian, ‘*Ciao*.’

The Neapolitan tried to produce a smile. It wilted in the corners of his mouth.

‘Strange man,’ thought Gorsky walking up the poorly lit lane. ‘Hope not all Neapolitans are like him.’

It was a late December afternoon and the city was immersed in drizzle and fog. Cold dampness saturated the air.

‘Smells like smoke and feels like snow,’ mumbled Gorsky turning right into Lungotevere Street. It was packed with slow-moving cars and apparently suicidal motorcyclists, pedestrians running for their lives, all engulfed in a cacophony of ear-piercing sounds. Gorsky felt a tinge of nostalgia thinking back to his little secluded room in Casa di Santa Francesca Romana - the hotel-monastery where he had spent the last couple of nights, courtesy of Vatayev’s business partner, the San Egidio organisation. The hotel was near the Vatican and it was popular among clerics from around the world who came to visit the Holy See. Santa Francesca had been the wife of a fifteenth-century nobleman. She had lived her entire adult life in the villa, he learnt from a brochure.

After a few hundred steps, he made a right turn onto a bridge over the Tiber and entered the ancient city, a spider web of narrow streets and passages. With each step a silent,

impenetrable wall of darkness grew behind his back. By now the raindrops had turned into snowflakes and Gorsky interrupted his march to cast a glance at the little map he carried, struggling to make any sense of it. He mumbled a Russian profanity that involved ice, bears and virgins, then continued towards via delle Botteghe Oscure.

Fifteen minutes later he stood in front of a marble plaque with the name of the street. After another hundred steps towards Torre Argentina he stopped in front of a tiny, poorly lit shop. The sign above read: Antiquariato Pincherle and the shop window displayed a small red rug and a dusty writing desk with a menorah on top. He entered. A bell chimed and an old woman's voice reached out from the darkened depths: 'Chi è?'

'A visitor,' said Gorsky stepping forward. The space was so cluttered and the room so dark that he couldn't see his way.

'We are closed,' said the old woman, now standing in a well-lit doorway at the back of the shop. 'But the angel sang for you, visitor,' she said.

'The angel?' said Gorsky. 'I have some business here with Mr Pincherle; he expects me.'

'Of course, of course, come through,' said the old woman. 'You, are a lucky man, Mr...?'

'Gorsky, Alex Gorsky,' he said. The shop was no more than three metres wide and it felt like a crypt leading to the depths of a cave under a sacred mountain. There are more hospitable-looking ravines in Chechnya, thought Gorsky. There were crystal chandeliers and cast-iron lighting units hanging from the ceiling, pieces of furniture sitting on top of each other, woodturning and gardening tools, walking sticks and horse-riding equipment. The walls were covered with pictures, framed photographs of ladies in period evening dresses with wide-brimmed hats adorned by luscious plumes, theatre fans and parasols; of portraits of monocle-wearing gentlemen with thin moustaches, in double-breasted suits with gold watch chains. Against the walls were a couple of desks covered by inkwells and fountain pens, hand-coloured black and white postcards, medals from distant wars, pipes and tobacco cases, mirrors, compasses, silver paper knives, old dolls, daggers, gilded dining sets and clocks that looked like they had stopped ticking a century earlier. A Luger pistol and a tropical Tarbush fez sat next to a white silk kimono with a cherry tree motif.

Gorsky stood on the only clear patch of floor space.

‘This angel will protect you, signor Gorsky,’ said the woman. ‘That much, I know.’

‘*Buona sera,*’ said Gorsky as he finally reached the back of the shop and stood in front of the shopkeeper.

‘The Russian gentleman Mr Kaganov sends me,’ he said. ‘The man who came last week to buy the sword. Remember *il russo*, Mr Kaganov?’

‘Oh, yes of course. *Il russo*, the collector from London, *sì, sì*, I remember. Come this way.’ The woman made a gesture inviting the visitor to follow her through the lit doorway. A cat ran ahead.

They walked into a small, windowless office that had a subterranean feel. It featured a desk, the lamp on it the only source of feeble, yellowish light. There were two wooden chairs, a couple of random pieces of furniture, and a framed black and white photograph. An old man sat in an armchair and the cat leaped straight onto the blanket covering his lap. One hand on his walking stick, the man began petting the cat with the other. Dark glasses obscured most of his face. In the middle of the office stood a Chinese man in an elegant dark coat. He held a long silver box in his hand.

‘*Buona sera,*’ said the old man and Gorsky returned the salutation.

‘This is Mr Zheng,’ said the old man to no one in particular, and turned to the new visitor. ‘And you are?’

‘My name is Gorsky, and I am here on behalf of Mr Alexey Kaganov, the Russian collector who came to visit you last week.’

‘Oh, I see. Yes, I remember,’ said the old man. ‘Mr Kaganov, of course. He was amazed to see the little bundle we had here and the sword. Caravaggio’s sword, mid you.’

‘Yes, the sword,’ confirmed Gorsky. ‘I was instructed to collect the sword.’

‘This fine gentleman,’ the old man said pointing at Mr Zheng, ‘came all the way from Beijing to purchase a unique sword that belonged to the Japanese master poet Matsuo Bashō. This sword, you see, can cut words in mid-air, as soon as they are spoken but before they are heard.’

The Chinese man nodded slightly and a hint of a smile appeared in the corners of his mouth.

‘I must be going,’ he said. ‘Nice to meet you.’

Gorsky nodded back, but before he could say something appropriate the man was gone. Light on his feet, quick, interesting character, he thought before turning his attention to the host.

‘Do you want to take your coat off?’ asked the woman.

‘No, thank you,’ said Gorsky and took a seat. ‘I came to see you, Mr Pincherle as...’

‘I know,’ said Pincherle. ‘I know.’

‘You know?’

‘You came all the way from London on behalf of the Russian collector, Mr Kaganov?’

‘I did.’

‘Shall I bring the parcel?’ asked the old woman.

‘Yes, please do,’ said the man. ‘As per our agreement, Mr Kaganov has transferred the money and the documents are ready for you. The artefacts are yours to take to London.’

‘Artefacts? Is there more than one?’ asked Gorsky. ‘I thought there was just the sword?’

‘The bundle, there are the letters of course,’ said Pincherle, ‘And yes, there is the sword.’

‘I didn’t know about the letters.’

‘Mr Kaganov came about the letters first, you see. His interest was primarily in this little bundle. It was very important to him. It was so important that he read them twice while sitting in that very same chair. Only later did he decide that he wanted the sword too.’

The woman left the room and the man turned toward the visitor, trying to discern the contours of his face.

‘*Slavo?*’ said Pincherle.

‘Yes, *Russo,*’ said the visitor.

‘Have you been in a war?’ continued Pincherle and tapped the floor with his walking stick.

‘No, I haven’t.’ Gorsky frowned. He didn’t like questions about the war. He had no answers. He too only had questions.

‘No, of course not,’ said Pincherle leaning back in his chair stroking the sleeping cat. Then his lower lip trembled.

‘I can tell men of war, you see,’ he said, tapping the floor again. The cat woke up, raised its head, looked around before deciding to continue napping.

The old woman came back with a long wooden case that she carefully placed on the desk. She took out a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped its lid.

‘He asked you about the war, didn’t he?’ she said. ‘I apologise. He does that to all our visitors and that’s why he has no friends left.’

‘My friends are all dead. They died in the war,’ said Pincherle. ‘They are all dead.’

‘Please forgive the old fool,’ the woman said, continuing to wipe the lid while Pincherle hung his head and sat, still stroking the cat.

Gorsky approached the desk. The old woman moved aside and invited him to inspect the case. It was just under a metre in length and fifteen centimetres wide. It featured two keyholes, with little keys in place, but the lid was already unlocked so Gorsky lifted it.

‘This is a very rare artefact, sir,’ said Pincherle. ‘This sword is said to have belonged to the collection of Cardinal del Monte who, in the year 1600, lost it in a game of cards to Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio, the painter. The story has it that this game of cards took place in the Palazzo Madama the very night that the philosopher Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake at the nearby piazza Campo de’ Fiori. A game of cards played by the Cardinal, Caravaggio and Galileo Galilei, the scientist.’

‘May I?’ asked Gorsky and Pincherle nodded in approval.

‘Of course.’

Gorsky took the sword out of the box with both hands, carefully, as if it were a delicate and fragile porcelain vase. He lifted it and looked down the blade’s fine edge, felt the weight and balance, scrutinized the shape of the hilt, the cross-guard, the grip and the pommel, the ricasso. He then focused on the blade: ‘Very fine workmanship, very fine.’

‘Minted at the bottega Guerrini in Milan,’ said Pincherle. ‘Leonardo da Vinci is said to have designed weapons for the Guerrini. Who knows, it might be a da Vinci design. That would be something, wouldn’t it?’

‘Yes, it would,’ said Gorsky as he brought the blade closer and began reading the inscription aloud: ‘*Nec spe nec metu*, right?’

Pincherle nodded. ‘That was the motto of Caravaggio’s bunch of drunkards and thieves who fancied themselves as artists. Without hope, without fear.’

Gorsky took the sword in his right hand and cut a circle in the air with it. The weapon felt light, manageable. The handle was small for his hand but it felt as though it were endowed

with mystical qualities drawn from the warm ashes of Giordano Bruno, the telescopes of Galileo, the sinister quality of Caravaggio's paintings, the secrets of the Vatican cardinals and the baroque grandeur of their palaces.

‘Without hope, without fear,’ repeated Gorsky.

He liked this disquieting motto. It struck a chord, recalled distant memories, shapes and apprehensions. It held the scent and promise of the unknown, remote, forgotten and finally, perhaps, found. Gorsky was no expert in swords, Italian painters or art in general, but he knew how to listen and he recognized that the cold, timeworn steel had stories to tell.

‘This is the sword that killed Tomassoni,’ said Pincherle. ‘A young man of good Roman stock who had the misfortune to pick a fight with Merisi over a game of tennis. After the murder, Merisi fled and turned fugitive. In Malta, he struck a deal with a Templar knight and exchanged the sword for safe passage to Sicily. Mr Kaganov liked that part of the story very much. Giving one's sword in exchange for one's life.’

‘I can imagine,’ said Gorsky with a wry smile. He was well versed in the taste and inclinations of the said gentleman. ‘Artists brandishing swords are a sure sign of dangerous times. Where did you find the sword?’

‘I acquired this and some other items via my Lebanese connection. He bought them, he told me, from a wealthy Syrian refugee,’ said Pincherle, nodding.

‘An intriguing, complex story.’ Gorsky wasn't inclined to believe the old man's tales. Too much storytelling, too much Italian elegance and not enough... what was that the word he was looking for... substance?

‘How do I know that this item is what you claim it is?’ said Gorsky.

The old man laughed tentatively. ‘There are two ways you can go about it. You either study the subject matter, or you study people, so that you then know when they are lying. Only two ways.’

‘There is another one — a third way,’ said Gorsky. ‘There's always another way of doing things.’

‘What would that be?’

‘You buy the story too, start believing it, merge it with reality.’

The old man laughed more heartily now and even slapped his knee, startling the cat. Gorsky turned towards the woman and asked her to close the case and hand him the documentation necessary for exporting it.

‘Everything is ready,’ said the woman. She opened a desk drawer, took out a large brown envelope and passed it to the old man.

‘Mr Kaganov has paid for everything?’

‘He has,’ said the woman.

‘Indeed,’ said Pincherle, opening the envelope and taking out a bundle of very old handwritten papers.

‘These are the letters,’ said the old man. ‘They are all in Russian, but a friend translated the first couple for me. Mr Kaganov was most impressed. So impressed that he bought them all immediately and asked me not to mention the bundle to anyone.’

‘Thank you,’ said Gorsky, taking the bundle and the envelope, which Pincherle extended towards him. He glanced at the first page on top of the bundle. The handwriting was neat, the letters very small and every page densely filled. He read the name of the sender aloud, ‘Agathon Karlovich Fabergé.’

Where had he heard that name before? He knew that name. He read the first line:

‘Sankt Petersburg, 1921. *Pis'mo ot voennova ministra.*’

‘A letter from the minister of war,’ said Gorsky. ‘They call them ministers of defence these days, don’t they?’ He then placed the bundle into the envelope, and slid it into the inside pocket of his coat.

‘I’ll show you out, Mr Gorsky,’ said the woman handing over the box with the sword.

‘Thank you.’

‘Buona fortuna,’ said Pincherle, picking up the cat from the floor and putting her back on his lap.

Gorsky followed the old woman through the shop trying to avoid the maze of antiques and stalactites. After bidding farewell, he stepped out into the dark street. He glanced at his watch. It was still early so he decided to walk across the Tiber and straight to the Roma Sparita restaurant. The place was on his way and Kolya would be there still.

‘Good,’ he thought, heading again into the dense web of Roman streets. It took him twenty minutes to reach the Tiber and another ten to cross the Garibaldi Bridge and reach Viale di Trastevere. The thoroughfare was packed with cars, trams and buses working their way in and out of the city centre. It was a damp cold evening with the few pedestrians bundled up in woollen scarves. Romans are terrified by these few flakes of snow, Gorsky thought, laughing as he pictured the hard-frozen winter landscape of his native Voronezh. Car headlights turned people into shadows scampering across the walls of adjacent apartment blocks. Ambulance and police sirens wailed in the distance. Car horns made people curse aloud and the shadows move faster.

After a few hundred metres Gorsky turned into a narrow pedestrian passage, came out on the other side and continued in parallel with Trastevere. He soon reached Via Della Luce and continued to the little piazza at the end of the street. Fifty metres before the neon lights of Roma Sparita he stopped. He held the long box in one hand while the other remained in the pocket of his coat. He tried to discern the shadows in front of the restaurant. There was a shadow in the doorway next to the restaurant and Gorsky saw the contours of a man in a ski jacket. This must be the unsociable Neapolitan, he thought. Kolya was nowhere to be seen and Gorsky thought that he was probably dozing in the car. His black Audi was parked down the street.

At that very moment, he saw Vatayev and Irina coming out. They took a couple of steps in the direction of the Neapolitan. Vatayev was struggling to open an umbrella with one hand while his wife held on to his other arm. Gorsky took a couple of steps, raised his hand and was just about to call out when a shadow jumped out of a nearby entrance and after a couple of quick steps stopped in front of the couple. Next, Irina’s scream pierced the night. Vatayev stepped forward and Gorsky saw the muzzle flash of a gun and heard a shot, then another one. He dropped the case and ran. A third blast, and Vatayev fell to the ground. Irina continued to scream until she too was cut down by two shots in quick succession. Gorsky took the gun out of his pocket. He was no more than ten metres away and could clearly see the Neapolitan, who turned the gun in his direction. Gorsky threw himself over the hood of a car, fired a shot and hid behind another vehicle. He got up on his feet just in time to see the weapon dropping out of the Neapolitan’s hand and his body crashing against a wall, bouncing back and then falling to the pavement. There was a dark smudge on the wall and it was only when Gorsky came

close that he realized that half of the man's face was missing. He scanned the surrounding buildings and rooftops. All was quiet. He picked up the Neapolitan's gun, slid it into his pocket and took cover behind one of the parked vehicles. Someone else had been shooting — using a large-calibre weapon.

After a couple of seconds, Gorsky managed to crawl towards the immobile bodies in front of the restaurant entrance. Vatajev was hit in the forehead and the chest while Irina had blood all over her neck and chest. He stooped down to check if they were breathing. They were not.

A group of people was now coming out of the restaurant and gathering at the entrance, afraid to step outside.

They are waiting for the police, thought Gorsky, so they must be on their way. I still have a couple of minutes left. He went to first pick up the box he had dropped. He then walked towards the parked Audi. On the front seat a bulky body slumped against the window. It was Kolya. Gorsky opened the door, and looked at his friend's glassy eyes. A small calibre bullet had entered the right-hand side of the skull. Behind the ear, Gorsky saw the entry wound and a couple of drops of blood.

'Goodbye,' said Gorsky. With his gloved hand, he dropped the killer's gun into the car. He pressed the button to open the trunk and picked up his bag. He then crossed the street and walked away. When he felt out of sight of the party gathered in front of Roma Sparita he started to walk briskly. He needed to get out of there as quickly as possible.

If asked, he could claim he was carrying a flute or a clarinet. That he was a musician, a painter, a banker, or an art lover stranded in Rome. His wife left him for Joe, a rich American with whom she ran away to his Texas ranch and cattle business. He was Nureyev's long-lost brother or Dostoevsky's grandson. He was in a hurry and the only thing that mattered was getting out of Rome, out of Italy and into the safety of Kaganov's empire. Yes, he would be able to spin a story, to pretend to be someone else, anyone else. All the stories would flow into one and he could tell them in any order, in any language if that helped him reach the airport.

After a ten-minute walk, he hailed a taxi and asked to be taken to Fiumicino.

'*Certo*,' said the driver and turned up the radio. He was following a live report of a football match from Buenos Aires. A small Argentinian flag hung from the rear-view mirror.

‘Boca Juniors,’ he yelled, banging with both his hands against the wheel and turned up the radio even louder.

Good, thought Gorsky. He is so absorbed in his game that he will not remember me. He took out his mobile phone and dialled his contact. The phone rang twice.

‘*Alyo?*’

‘Senka,’ whispered Gorsky.

‘*Da?*’

‘Listen carefully,’ said Gorsky and looked at the driver who was happily commenting on the performance of his team. ‘Vatayev, Irina and Kolya are dead!’

‘What did you just...?’

‘Shut up and listen. They are all dead and we don’t have much time.’

The driver’s team was winning. Shouting and thumping the wheel with both his hands, he took the motorway toward the sea and Fiumicino.

II

Half an hour later the taxi stopped in front of the airport. Gorsky handed the money to the driver, waved away the change and got out. He hoped that he hadn't attracted the man's attention. The news about the killings would go public in minutes. All media outlets would report the assassination of a Russian businessman, his wife and two more people.

Gorsky understood why the Neapolitan had to be disposed of. It was a mop-up operation. No traces, no loose ends. There was one loose end, though, and his name was Alex Gorsky. Whoever ordered the hit must have access to insiders who would work this out. The only good news was that the Italian police would not be given the opportunity to question him. His boss wouldn't allow that.

Gorsky entered the airport terminal and approached the VIP counter. He showed his passport to a neatly groomed Italian woman: 'I am with Mr Kaganov.'

She smiled and waved him through.

The security officer nodded as Gorsky went out through the gate and stepped onto the tarmac. He had a gun in his pocket, a recently fired Sig Sauer. The VIP badge does wonders, he sighed with relief while climbing the steps up to the jet's door. A man in an aviation uniform waved him in and Gorsky entered the cabin. There were eight large leather seats on each side and in the first to the right sat a man in a white shirt. He had dark, deep-set eyes, short brown hair and a very high forehead made even higher by a receding hairline. His cheeks seemed pale, as if drained of all blood. The expression on his face was one of worry.

'Alex,' said the man.

Gorsky sat down on the left-hand side and dropped the case on the floor underneath the seat. He unbuttoned the collar of his shirt and took off his tie.

'Privyet, Senka,' he said.

They were relieved to hear the rising whine of the jet engines, both hoping to be airborne as soon as possible.

‘What happened?’ asked Senka Golovkin.

‘I am not sure myself,’ Gorsky replied uneasily. ‘I know what I saw but I am not sure I understand it.’

The plane began taxiing. Gorsky asked: ‘Did you call our associates in Rome?’

‘I did as you suggested,’ said Senka. ‘I told them to send their public relations person to spin a story about another mafia shoot-out and to explain that the killer was gunned down by his own associates.’

‘Do you really think this was an Italian mafia affair?’

‘No, I don’t,’ said Golovkin, ‘but you are right, we need to divert the media focus from the Russian connection. Now, calm down and tell me what happened. Step by step, in detail.’

The engines throttled up for take-off and the passengers felt their thrust pin them to their seats. In under a minute they were airborne, en route to London.

Gorsky leaned back in his seat and took a deep breath. He focused on things he had observed, leaving out conclusions or feelings.

Once he finished, he looked at Senka. Now was the time to start piecing it all together. A working hypothesis was needed and Golovkin was the right man to produce it. They had to understand the reasons behind these murders.

‘The police will work out for themselves that the shooter was hit by an elephant gun and not a pistol,’ said Golovkin.

‘They will,’ said Gorsky. ‘He was probably hit by both a small calibre bullet and a dum-dum shell. A desperate Italian junkie caught in the crossfire during a merry Russian mafia family shootout? No, the man was connected, he was an insider and the police will soon show interest in the man who shot him. Kaganov wouldn’t want that, Senka, would he?’

Senka shook his head and as he opened his mouth to say something, the on-board satellite phone lit up and warbled. The two exchanged glances and Senka picked it up.

‘Yes, Boss, sure Boss, he is here, yes. You want to talk to him, sure.’ He passed the receiver to Gorsky.

‘Tell me,’ barked the voice from the receiver.

‘Vatayev and Irina are dead,’ said Gorsky, ‘Kolya is dead too, Boss.’

‘How?’ said Kaganov.

‘Everything was fine until last night,’ began Gorsky and he retold that evening’s story from the moment he left the antiquarian.

‘Did you collect the items I sent you for?’

‘The sword?’ said Gorsky, ‘I did’.

‘Did you pick up anything else?’

‘A bundle of old letters.’

‘Good. Keep the bundle safe and bring it over,’ said the Boss. ‘Give me Senka now.’

Gorsky passed the receiver back to Golovkin and tapped the front pocket of his coat as if to make sure that the bundle was still there.

Senka exchanged a couple of words with the Boss, nodded several times and put the receiver down.

‘That was strange,’ said Gorsky. ‘Did he ask about Vatayev?’

‘No,’ replied Senka, ‘he didn’t.’

‘Why Vatayev? He must have been the prime target, right?’ said Gorsky. ‘Where did the Italian turn up from anyway?’

‘Santino is the name. San Egidio security staff, had clearance from Rome as well as from London.’

‘From London?’

‘Yes, he came through his uncle’s connections, our usual partners.’

‘Who’s the uncle?’

‘Colonel Vargas,’ he said after a brief pause.

‘Vargas?’

‘Yes, Vargas,’ Senka confirmed with a nervous gesture. ‘What did you pick up from the antiquarian?’ he said.

‘The sword that the Boss bought last week.’

‘Why didn’t he take it with him?’

‘Needed the art treasure paperwork for export... or something; and there was also the bundle. He bought these letters...’

‘The sword is in there?’ said Senka and pointed a finger at the long case underneath Gorsky’s seat.

‘Caravaggio’s sword.’

‘The artist? The one who killed the pimp of his favourite model?’

‘I don’t know the details and right now, believe me, I don’t really care.’

‘Did the antiquarian give you anything else?’

‘He did,’ said Gorsky and took the bundle out of his pocket. ‘The letters.’

‘Let me see,’ said Senka and took the bundle from Gorsky.

‘Agathon,’ he muttered the name on the first letter and began reading the neat Cyrillic writing.

While Senka Golovkin entertained himself with the letters, Gorsky went back to the beginning of the evening. The Casa di Santa Francesca Romana, the meeting in the street, the walk, the antiquarian, the Chinaman, the sword and the letters, the old man’s tall tales, the walk back across the river, the shooting and the four corpses... the taxi driver, the airport, the flight, Senka...

‘Listen,’ Senka said abruptly as turbulence shook the plane. He pushed the letters into Gorsky’s hands.

‘Look at this.’

Gorsky took the letters and leaned back into his seat. Senka was reliable. He had won the youth chess championship of the USSR. He knew how to solve problems, how to read between the lines, to tie up loose ends. Senka was no secret agent or intelligence operative, but he knew things. The two of them went back many years and Gorsky trusted his loyalty, his cool head and analytical skills.

All letters seemed to be written by the same person and the signature was that of Agathon Karlovich Fabergé.

‘One of the jewellery people, so what?’ said Gorsky. He began reading from the middle of one of the yellowish pages.

When the doorbell rang, I dropped my book. Eerie feeling. After my release from prison we haven’t had any visitors. The family had fled the country, there were no friends left either. Some were imprisoned, others too scared to be thought of as my associates.

I walked quietly down the corridor and stood behind the door. I stopped breathing and heard voices, the sound of shuffling feet, a cough. Eventually, I summoned all my strength and opened the door. I found myself facing three shadows. There stood a man in a long black

leather coat with a visor hat. A sure sign of a higher standing in the new Soviet pecking order: a People's Commissar. I know the purpose of that office and the sort of men who hold it. Behind the officer stood two soldiers, brandishing rifles.

The Commissar shouted his name and then asked for me by name, patronymic and surname. He asked for comrade Agathon Karlovich Fabergé. No, no mistake there. Upon receiving confirmation of my identity, he reached for his satchel and presented me with an envelope. It contained a letter from comrade Trotsky, the Minister of War, he said, and held the paper in front of my nose. He had orders to wait for a response, the Commissar said, nodded and clicked his heels in a salute. All so terribly theatrical, my dear Victor.

At first, I hesitated to take the envelope and I stood there staring at the troika. Eventually, I took it and checked the name of the recipient. I was still hoping it wouldn't be mine. I was still hoping the CHEKA had made a mistake, that the Kremlin got it all wrong, that maybe the Minister of War wanted to summon someone else, someone completely different, not me again. I gathered enough strength to break the seal.

It was not very long. Leon Davidovitch Trotsky was writing to summon me to Moscow to enable me (ha, ha... to *enable* me!) to give a contribution to the Revolution with special reference to the newly established Commission for Expertise. The said Commission was led by a luminary of the revolutionary artistic expression (yes, that's what he called him, a luminary!) comrade Maxim Gorky under the personal supervision of the Premier of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. I was to travel to Moscow immediately and report to Vitaly Fressman, a professor of geology at Moscow State University. Fressman was the man in charge of the inventory of gold, precious stones, jewels and other items of degenerate luxury that had been expropriated from the decadent aristocracy and the imperial family in accordance with the first amendment of the 5 October 1918 Revolutionary Decree on Registration and Protection of Monuments of Culture and Ancient Art, Owned by Private Persons, Societies and Institutions... and so on and so forth.

I read the letter three times and said I would report to Moscow. What else? The Commissar saluted and the lot marched off into the darkness while I went to my room and sat back in my armchair. I stared at the flowery details of a rug for hours. I had to think.

Lydia didn't utter a word. She didn't ask me anything. She just sat there waiting. Eventually, I told her that I had to leave St. Petersburg and go to Moscow, to work on that

diabolical inventory. They wanted to put my expertise to good use, I told her. That's good, I said. When they need you, they keep you alive, said Lydia. But when they don't need you anymore, they send you to Siberia. If you are lucky. We sat in silence for the remainder of the evening. Lydia is a wise woman, you see.

Gorsky cast a glance at his partner who was looking through the window and wiping his face with a handkerchief. He then returned to the letters.

My dear Victor,

I reported to Moscow on 10 August and was assigned to the coordination of the newly established Division for the Inventory of Expropriated Bourgeois Commodities. I saw mountains of diamonds and gemstones of all colours, shapes and sizes, lakes of silk, rivers of gold and silver jewellery in the process of being broken, smashed by a clueless, fanatical mob of foul-smelling serfs equipped with hammers and rusty bayonets, possessed by soul-devouring greed and a burning desire to avenge a historical injustice. Forty train cars filled with treasure were brought from St. Petersburg alone. These people worked in freezing temperatures, day and night, without electricity, proper tools or skills.

In January 1922, I was transferred to a more important and secretive assignment. Nikolai II Romanov had cleared the Kremlin Armory of all weaponry and converted it into the Imperial Family Treasury. After the Revolution, upon strict orders from Lenin, all the Tsar's valuables from around the country were shipped to Moscow and amassed in one place, piled up, tossed around without being properly catalogued. When I entered the Armory, I was left breathless. Nothing, nothing I had ever seen or imagined could compare with that spectacle. No story, no tale, no account or yarn could match the splendour of the gold, the excellent cut of the diamonds, rubies and sapphires, the supreme handiwork of the Italian, German, Dutch, Belgian and French goldsmiths in creating sceptres, necklaces, crowns, rings, watches... There were chests filled with gold coins, piles of golden bars stacked to the ceiling, Renaissance and Baroque paintings were left leaning against the walls, marble sculptures sitting on precious rugs alongside furniture, chandeliers, silk gowns and tailored uniforms and evening dresses. And nothing, nothing could have prepared me for the spectacle of the sheer volume of it, of the entire Kremlin Armoury filled up to the ceiling with riches.

And, my God, I was the one who prepared these goods for transportation. I was the one who had sealed many a room, safe deposit and freight car in St. Petersburg.

Six months later, my dear Victor, I wrote to the director of the Museum Fund, Natalya Sedova, the wife of the Minister of War, and requested an urgent audience. I asserted boldly in my submission that the matter was of the highest revolutionary interest. It had to do with the Western, capitalist markets.

Can you imagine, Victor? Me advising the communist on capitalist market matters. The Socialist Museum Fund operated under the auspices of the Committee for Enlightenment headed by Lunatcharsky. The main task of the said Socialist Museum Fund was to compile an inventory of all the exceptionally precious and artistically outstanding samples that could then be offered for sale in the West. The Bolsheviks needed enormous amounts of money to feed the starving population, to launch the widely announced first five-year plan, and to start the industrial reform necessary to convert feudal Russia into a modern, industrial nation. They needed to sell the confiscated assets.

By July 1922, I knew very well that once the inventory had been completed or the Bolsheviks had realized that the global market was unfavourable, they would opt for a wholesale trade, at which point I would only represent a hindrance to many a corrupt commissar and zealot. I had only one chance.

Natalya Sedova welcomed me by announcing that she didn't have any time to waste. She said she was tired of people like me. People coming with all sorts of pleas and stupid excuses. She hated tears for we had a revolution to run, didn't we? She hated seeing grown men cry. It was so unbecoming, undignified. She suddenly asked about my letter.

I explained that I had in my possession the most precious jewel the world had ever seen. A jewel most rare, valuable and yet... anonymous. I said that I had in my possession the Russian Soul, the finest jewel in the world. It was my intention to barter it for the freedom of my family and my own.'

Gorsky read the last sentence twice and then turned towards Senka.

'A jewel called The Russian Soul was in his possession?' he said. 'Who is he? Agathon what?'

‘Agathon Fabergé, Alex,’ said Senka, ‘he was a jeweller and The Russian Soul is a jewel. A very special and precious jewel.’

‘A jewel like the Easter eggs the Fabergés used to make for the court?’

‘That’s right. Just like those Easter eggs they used to make for the Romanovs.’

‘So, he wanted to exchange the jewel for a pass to leave the country?’

‘Yes, and that’s what he did.’

‘How would you know?’

‘It’s common knowledge that Agathon Fabergé and his family crossed over frozen Lake Ladoga in a sledge and reached Finland. I think that was in 1927. He spent the rest of his days in Helsinki, collecting stamps.’

‘I see. And what would the Boss’s interest in the letters be? He picked them up because they are in Russian, I imagine.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Senka, ‘Aleksey Kaganov is not the kind of person who trots around the world collecting White Russian émigré diaries for the fun of it. Sentimentality is not exactly his forte.’

‘So, why then?’

‘What if...’

‘What if what?’

‘What if the jewel still exists? What if it can be traced? Brought back to the country, it would be a powerful symbol of historical continuity with Imperial Russia. It could symbolize the glory, the power, the future...’ Senka took the letter from Gorsky’s hand and read aloud: ‘The finest jewel in the world and a symbol of Russia.’

‘Fine, it was a precious stone,’ said Gorsky.

‘No, this wasn’t just any jewel,’ said Senka, ‘The most precious jewels the Fabergés made were those Easter eggs for the Imperial family...’

‘Ok, it’s an Easter egg, so what?’

‘There is a problem with that,’ said Senka, ‘the list of eggs is well known and documented. Their whereabouts and ownership are known, catalogued.’

‘So?’

‘So... there is no such Fabergé Easter egg,’ cried Senka. ‘Officially, the Russian Soul doesn’t exist. This most precious of all jewels is not listed.’

III

It was early in the morning and the smell of tea lingered in the air. Elizabeth Dudley-Vernon came down the corridor and stopped in front of a door. She knocked twice. The plaque on the door read ‘Sir Jack Sailgood, Chief Operating Officer.’ Moscow was the young woman’s first Foreign Office posting and she knew she had to thread carefully

At that time of the day, Jack Sailgood would usually busy himself with writing the executive summary and then reading the online editions of several newspapers while listening to a variety of Ukrainian and Russian news outlets. That very morning his attention was drawn to a bizarre story featured in all the main Russian media outlets. A colourful group of young people had stormed the Church of the Holy Assumption in Voronezh, interrupting the Divine Liturgy to perform a rap number featuring lyrics with explicit sexual content and a dance routine that was subsequently described by Archbishop Alexis as primitive and lewd. According to Pravda.ru, a squadron of police in full riot gear escorted the group out politely. While being pushed out and shoved into the police vehicle the group members yelled slogans in support of transsexuals’ freedom to marry in a civil ceremony. The other major daily, Izvestia.ru, concluded that such an act of vandalism was insulting and used terms such as pornography, blasphemy and desecration to describe the act. A hardly noticeable spark lit up Sir Jack’s eyes and a smirk ran over his face.

There was a knock at the door and he called out for the visitor to enter.

Elizabeth Dudley-Vernon walked into the office and waited for Sir Jack to find the right button on the remote control to mute the audio. Moscow was the young woman's first Foreign Office posting and she knew she had to thread carefully.

Sailgood then made a gesture inviting the young woman to take a seat.

'Yes, Liz,' he said, trying to look like someone ready to listen.

Jack Sailgood was a man of medium stature with fair hair, light, sky-blue eyes and a piercing gaze. He sported a barely visible paunch, a clear testament to his longstanding beer-loving habits.

'Sir Jack, terribly sorry to intrude this early,' said Liz and paused as if to call for attention.

Sailgood shifted in his seat and leaned back in his chair.

'Tell me,' he said.

'WikiLeaks published a new batch of intercepted emails, reports and memos, and some of those contain...'

'Our emails, memos and reports?' interrupted Sailgood.

'No, thank God, no. This time they are not ours. Well, not all of them are ours. I mean, just a couple.'

'Just a couple...' said Sir Jack as he massaged his temples gently with both forefingers.

'Some of the messages contain very interesting information, though, about one of our favourite candidates to replace Myshkin.'

'Which one?'

'Aleksey Kaganov, the London-based oligarch.'

'I see.'

'His rating among the pro-Western intelligentsia is currently high as you will see from my report. He's also showing willingness to collaborate. He made contact.'

'That's fine. Apart from that, what makes him such an outstanding candidate?'

'He claims he can produce the Russian Soul.'

'The Russian Soul?' said Sailgood. 'Not even the evil spirit-slayer Dostoyevsky made such bold claims. Ha, ha, to produce the Russian Soul.'

'It's a jewel,' said Liz. 'The Russian Soul is a jewel. As you will see from my report, it is one of the famous Easter eggs that the last Russian Tsar used to commission annually over

a period of thirty years. Now that the Romanovs have been rehabilitated and sanctified, the importance of this jewel seems to have increased exponentially.'

'I've heard about these Fabergé eggs,' said Sailgood and shifted in his seat.

'Certain people, though, well known to us, of course,' explained Liz, 'are becoming nervous about this affair.'

'Some people are nervous because of this egg, you say?' sSailgood leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk.

'Yes, because of the jewel,' announced the young analyst, flushed with pride and a sense of achievement.

'The Russian Soul is the name of this egg?' said Sailgood.

'Russkaya Dusha, yes,' said Liz. 'The murder of the journalist Politkovskaya in Moscow, the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko with polonium and the attempted murder of the Russian banker Goluzhny in London. The suicide of Berezovsky in Sussex, bombs in Sofia and Mexico City, attacks in Paris, all seem to be linked to this jewel.'

Jack Sailgood lowered his chin on his hands as if praying. He scrutinized the young woman for a good few seconds.

'Sir Jack,' said Liz, putting a blue folder on the desk. 'You should read this. It's my full report on the case. I stayed up all night to have it ready for today.'

'Sure,' said Sailgood, coming out of his prayer posture and reclining back into his chair, 'I have a meeting with the Chinese today but I promise to devote my full attention to your report as soon as possible.'

'Thank you, Sir Jack,' said Liz standing up. 'Should you need additional information, please...'

'Thank you, Liz,' said Sailgood and picked up the phone.

Later that morning Sailgood took the blue folder from his desk and tossed it into the bottom drawer. It was a busy day. He had several meetings scheduled with the staff from his Odessa office as well as one with his Russian counterpart, Nikolai Patrushev. He liked Patrushev, and what he liked best about him were the first five to ten minutes of their meetings, when the Russian would lament the demise of the Cold War and the KGB.

‘Those were the days, Jack,’ Patrushev would say, ‘when you could count on the fact that your enemy cannot be trusted. And today, what do we have today? We are made to sit here pretending to be chums. Total rubbish, rubbish. Backstabbing has become the ultimate art form.’

On this occasion, the main subject of their conversation was the Ukrainian civil war that followed the Kiev ‘coup d’état,’ as Patrushev would refer to it, or the ‘Russian invasion of Crimea,’ as Sir Jack preferred to call it. Since they couldn’t find a single point of agreement, they decided to meet again after the next Foreign Ministers’ summit.

Later that same evening, Sailgood met two Chinese colleagues who were privy to information concerning the delivery of Russian anti-aircraft systems to the Syrian government. The Chinese also mentioned being in possession of documents listing instances of human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. To repay such courtesy, Sailgood briefed the Chinese about some activities of their dissidents in Western Europe. He handed over a document with the addresses, bank accounts and other personal details of some of the dissidents. The Chinese mentioned the technical expertise that they had acquired from American top-secret research projects that happen to employ patriotic Chinese scientists. They wouldn’t release the names of the projects and of the scientists involved, though.

‘Patience,’ thought Sailgood. ‘Patience.’

It was just one of those regular monthly social engagements characterized by a friendly and collaborative atmosphere that no one took too seriously except, of course, the notoriously suspicious and paranoid Russian Secret Service, the FSB.

After meeting the Chinese, Sailgood decided not to go straight home but to make a stopover at the office where he kept all his paperwork locked behind several layers of security. After an American operative had left his laptop in a Pigalle sex parlour a couple of months ago, Sailgood decided to be even more cautious than usual. The computer contained unscrambled files with the names of several dozen mercenaries infiltrated into Libya with the specific task of murdering Colonel Gaddafi. It also contained a Mossad report on contacts established with potential defectors, high-ranking Iranian officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Clearly, if such information were to fall into the wrong hands, it would be most unfortunate.

It was late, nearly midnight, and except for members of the security staff there was no one to be seen. Sailgood parked his car in the underground garage and took the elevator. He entered the office, switched on the lights and took off his jacket and tie. He opened a cabinet, grabbed a bottle of whisky and a glass, poured himself a drink and sat down at his desk.

After a sip and a deep breath, he decided to have a look at Dudley-Vernon's blue folder. But once he held the folder in his hands, he began to have second thoughts. After all, Liz was just trying to impress her superiors and advance through the ranks, wasn't she?

Sailgood mused as he took another sip. The heirs of the Romanov Empire. Bollocks! Let's see what the Russkies are up to now.

He opened the file and started to read.

Jack Sailgood glanced towards the clock on the wall. It was past midnight and his glass was empty.

'*Russkaya Dusha*,' he mumbled and sprung up from his chair. Everything has a price. Everything must have a price. It's the most fundamental law of Mother Nature. Even the damned Russian Soul must have a price tag. It might be in roubles but a price tag nonetheless.

He put Liz's folder back in the drawer, closed the drawer, grabbed his jacket and left the office. Once in the underground garage, he walked briskly to his Jaguar, opened the door and pressed the engine start button. He was about to pull the gearshift into drive when he changed his mind abruptly. No, this situation required urgent action. He fished the phone out of his pocket, scrolled through the address list and found the thumbnail of a middle-aged, blond man sporting gold-rimmed glasses. He tapped on the face and waited.

It rang eight times before the sleepy voice of Tom Deutsch cried: 'Go to hell! Do you have any idea what time it is?'

'Tom,' said Jack Sailgood, 'we need to talk. It's about Siberia.'

'Come again?' interjected Tom.

'I can't say any more over the phone,' said Sailgood, 'I need to see you.'

'Yeah,' uttered Deutsch. 'I'm in Odessa.'

‘You must get back to Moscow, it’s important,’ said Sailgood. ‘I’ll be in your office lunch time tomorrow.’

Sailgood didn’t feel like answering questions. He put his mobile back into the inside pocket of his jacket, pulled the gearshift into drive and pressed the accelerator. He drove out and onto the Smolenskaya Naberezhnaya Boulevard.

The night was quiet and there was little traffic, just delivery vans and a couple of taxis. He turned the radio on. They were playing a Vladimir Vysotsky classic, *Ya ne lyublyu*, I don’t like. It was sung by a young Georgian with a difficult name. Something like Maisuradze, Maitaradze... ending in -adze, anyway.

Sailgood began humming: ‘A million is exchanged for a rouble, let the big changes come ahead, but I’ll never be able to like them.’

He liked these lyrics. He really did. Especially now as he drove down the Boulevard in a good mood, humming and mumbling along with the Georgian -adze fellow.

IV

It was one a.m. when Gorsky came out of the terminal building and went straight towards a large, bald man wearing a dark blue uniform. Senka Golovkin trotted along. As the pair approached, the man nodded and opened the back door of a large sedan.

‘Dobriy vyecher.’

‘Privyet, Vanya,’ said Gorsky and took the front passenger seat. Senka Golovkin sat at the back.

‘Where to?’ asked Vanya.

‘Shepherd’s Bush,’ said Gorsky.

‘What for?’ Senka asked.

‘To pay a visit to our friend, Vargas. I want to hear from him personally about the Neapolitan that he sent to Vatayev.’

Gorsky didn’t know Vargas very well. He had met him only a couple of times, and always in the company of the Boss or his business associates. He had spoken to the man only twice, and briefly. But that was enough for him to make up his mind: he didn’t like him.

‘Since you want to talk to Vargas,’ said Senka, *‘let me fill you in on some background information. You might find it useful. Vargas’s brother Gregor owns a couple of night clubs in Paris and has dealings with many international entrepreneurs, including some not very friendly Bulgarian racketeers who try to squeeze him for a rather handsome sum on a regular basis. Gregor sends his negotiators to discuss the rather unfortunate issue, but these people are just out of a war zone and rough around the edges. This all led to a major misunderstanding and a couple of Bulgarians hospitalized. To send a message, the Bulgarians organized a hit on Gregor. This resulted in a most unfortunate incident. Gregor’s wife Angelique was hit by a bazooka while driving to the beauty parlour. The episode started a gang war and sparked Gregor’s interest in real estate. He approached Bata Negulescu, Vargas’ business associate in Romania. At the time, this Bata had just wrapped up a trafficking, smuggling, import-export*

business and decided to invest his money in Transylvanian tourism. He bought the castle of Vlad the Impaler, aka Count Dracula, and transformed it into a theme park. He devoted special attention to the castle dungeon, where he restored the torture equipment to brand-new condition. That was what sparked Gregor's interest. He inquired into the possibility of a joint venture—a hospitality centre for international VIP prisoners. There's a word for it now... extraordinary rendition. But Gregor's brother is a real champion who runs an elite tourist business in the Ukraine, a human safari of a sort. The Boss told me about it; he was very impressed by the innovative dimension of this business. I'm not sure how innovative that can be but... There you go. That's the family for you.'

'What's the business?'

'They pick up tourists in Kiev and take them to eastern Ukraine, close to the frontline between Kiev's forces and the separatists. They arm them with assault rifles or other weapons, as they wish. These could be rocket-propelled grenade launchers, AK-47s, hand grenades... and they let them shoot.'

'Shoot. At what?'

'They have a price list, apparently. Children and women cost less; they don't shoot back and are easy to approach. The separatist armed forces are the most expensive, obviously. They shoot back and require the use of military tactics.'

'And who are the tourists?'

'Anyone with enough money to pay for it. They have waiting lists, loyal customers, the business is booming. From London to the shooting ground in four, five hours and back in the morning for the opening of the stock exchange. Cocaine and girls are complimentary.'

'Entrepreneurs,' said Gorsky.

'Right,' said Senka. 'So, Colonel Vargas has some business interest in that specific venture. And not only that, our Colonel has started a new business venture in London, a cab business.'

'He's running a cab business, you say? What's next, an old people's home, a children's day care?' Gorsky didn't like the man and he couldn't help it.

'It's an aerial cab business. He imported a couple of choppers from Texas and started a deluxe air taxi service that includes a stocked bar, escorts and other small personal favours.'

‘Is that all? I am kind of disappointed. It sounds mild and friendly in comparison with the other ventures.’

‘No, there’s more, much more to it but we are out of time.’

The car had come to a stop in front of a restaurant. The bright neon sign on top of the shop window was red, white and green: ‘Trattoria la Bella Patria.’

‘I won’t be long,’ said Gorsky. ‘You stay here. Don’t move.’

The place was closed for business and only a couple of staff still busied themselves with cleaning and tidying up. The dining hall featured a dozen tables with chequered tablecloths, black and white photographs of Italian monuments, wreaths of garlic on the walls and bottles of wine on the shelves. Behind the counter stood a large pizza oven surrounded by logs - some of them real and some plastic. A stocky man in his early forties came to meet the visitor.

‘Hello,’ the man said. ‘We didn’t expect you.’

‘Hi, Haas,’ said Gorsky as the two shook hands. ‘Is Colonel Vargas in his office?’

‘He is, I think. He’s been here all evening,’ said Haas and pointed at a door in the corner, next to the pizza oven. ‘First door to the right.’

‘Thanks.’

Once through the doorway, Gorsky found himself in a long corridor. He had been here before. Once, he thought, possibly twice. He walked to the door and knocked.

‘Yes,’ he heard, and pressed the handle.

‘Gorsky?’ asked the man seated behind a glass-and-chrome desk and, nodding in recognition, showed the visitor to a chair. ‘Let me finish this conversation. I’ll be with you in a second.’ He was holding a phone.

The visitor sat in the chair, his hands in the pockets of his dark grey overcoat. While his host was giving instructions about an early morning fresh vegetables and fish trip to the market, Gorsky looked around. He knew of Vargas and he had met some of his boys. He had even been in this very office. Some of the framed photographs on the walls were new, and one of them caught his attention. It showed Vargas standing in the middle of a group of young men, all with moustaches and big smiles. They all looked alike, maybe because they were all Moldovan, or was it Romanian? No, no. Moldovan, Gorsky remembered. There was also a large colour photograph of the real Vargas, Colonel Vargas, as he preferred to be called, standing in front

of a warplane wearing a uniform with decorations. The plane was an old Soviet MIG-15 and the landscape behind it looked desolate.

‘That’s me in Monrovia,’ said Vargas switching his mobile off. ‘It was during my days in Liberia and well... Africa in general.’

‘Libya, you said?’

‘Libya also, but that was before,’ said Vargas and pointed at one of the photographs on the wall, ‘Me with a group of young officers. That was in Tripoli.’

‘What’s this?’ asked Gorsky nodding towards a richly designed Italian cuisine certificate that hung on the wall behind Vargas. The name on it was in large print and read ‘George Luciano Vargas.’

‘Well,’ said Vargas, ‘Luciano is my, how shall I put it, my *nom de guerre*. With my real name, Yoet, you don’t get very far in the pizza business.’

‘I hear you run a successful tourist business?’ asked Gorsky.

‘Well...’ started Vargas, unsure whether to talk about his operation or not. ‘It’s a tourist operation that we started in a couple of African countries. Now we are expanding it to parts of Europe. The business model existed before, in Bosnia in the ’90s. We just cleaned it up, recruited better staff and raised the professional level. We now have more experience, access to markets and of course, political support. We are networked, you see?’ explained Vargas. He held both hands on his beer belly and carefully waited for a reaction. There was none. Gorsky sat immobile in his dark coat. He knew there was more to that story.

‘We now operate in the Ukraine too, you see. The Boss helped us with his local connections. Without local knowledge, it is impossible to enter the area, let alone to do business.’

‘What kind of business?’ said Gorsky gripping the armrests of his chair as if to get up. Vargas seemed nervous. He was talking a lot, and there must have been a reason for that.

‘OK, OK...’ said Vargas leaning over the table. ‘We pay the locals handsomely. They have a war going on and need all the cash they can lay their hands on. So, we...’ Vargas started saying, but Gorsky interrupted him.

‘Your man, the Italian you sent to Vatayev some time ago, was killed last night. But more importantly and to the point,’ said Gorsky and made a brief pause, ‘he shot Vatayev and his wife in cold blood. He also shot a friend of mine.’

Vargas picked up the mobile phone from the desk and slid it in a pocket of his dark green jacket. He lit a cigarette.

‘Santino?’ he said. ‘In Rome?’

‘That’s the name and the place.’

‘You were there?’

‘I was there.’

‘Fuck,’ Vargas cried and banged his fist against the desk. ‘That little Italian cockroach... I don’t believe this. Are you sure he shot them? And who shot him? Who shot the boy, you?’

‘He did kill these people, yes. And no, I didn’t kill him. Santino, if that is his name, lay low in waiting. When the order came he carried out the task and became a liability. He was killed by sniper fire.’

‘How do you know it was sniper fire?’ asked Vargas.

‘Let’s just say that I possess that... skill, we can call it, and that I can tell,’ said Gorsky.

‘Did you see the shooter?’ asked Vargas, sucking on his cigarette.

‘No,’ said Gorsky and pushed his hands deeper in the pockets, ‘I didn’t.’

That is why he came directly to Vargas. He wanted to face him and see his first reaction.

‘I will make my inquiries,’ said Vargas, ‘the boy came recommended; his cousin worked with my brother in Paris. I will inquire and let you know.’

‘Vargas,’ said Gorsky leaning forward in his seat, ‘let me make this clear. We lost Boss’s deputy and two of his friends. The only known trail leads to this office and... straight to you, Vargas.’

‘Gorsky, let me...’

‘You don’t understand. You fucked up and now there is only one way out for you. That’s how it works. I need the name of the man who gave the order.’

‘The man who gave the order?’ said Vargas. ‘What do you...’

‘You heard me. People died and you are involved. I don’t know how much but I’ll find out. And once I do...’

‘But...’

‘I already told you what you need to do.’

‘Right,’ said Vargas and nodded. ‘Did you speak to the Boss?’

‘I did but that has nothing to do with you. You fucked it up and you better deal with it or you’ll have half of the Russian mafia coming after you. That’s not a threat – that’s a promise,’ said Gorsky and got up from the chair. ‘I’ll find my own way out.’

Back in the car, Gorsky sat down in the front passenger seat and turned back toward Senka.

‘I never liked that man,’ he said.

Vanya turned the engine on. Senka was still holding the Fabergé letters in his hand.

‘Anything new?’ said Gorsky, noticing that Senka had turned rather pale.

‘Leon Trotsky must have wanted this jewel badly.’

‘Trotsky?’ said Gorsky, ‘Why would that be?’

‘To finance his permanent revolution, to start a new international movement, and to liberate the Soviet Union from Stalin.’

‘I see,’ said Gorsky and exchanged a secretive glance with Vanya. Not those stories again. He knew his friend well enough to understand that this wasn’t about Stalin or Trotsky. ‘What’s happened?’

‘I just got a call.’

‘What call?’

‘A call from a police officer,’ said Senka. ‘From Scotland.’

‘Something happened to the Boss?’ said Gorsky, turning around to face his friend.

‘His car went off a cliff.’

‘And...?’

‘It exploded.’

‘And the passengers?’

‘Apparently all dead,’ Senka whispered. ‘Dead.’

V

At half past noon, Jack Sailgood stepped out of the metro train. He liked to travel on his own around the vast city. The Moscow metro system offered a valuable opportunity to develop a feel for the life of the ordinary man, the average Ivan. The vast underground cavern of the Byelorusskaya tube station was not overcrowded at that hour, and one could enjoy the elaborate geometry of the marble floor and the sumptuous ornaments adorning the walls and the vaulted ceiling.

Once past the 35-meter-high escalator and on the street, Sailgood walked gingerly over the slippery crust of ice and snow and turned left into Lesnaya Street. A few hundred steps later he found himself in front of building number three. He approached the locked entranceway, scrutinized the cluster of buzzers and pressed the button next to the name 'Winston and Partners. Law firm.' An indifferent female voice crackled through the speaker: 'What do you want?'

'Jack Sailgood of the British Gas and Petroleum Corporation,' he replied as distinctly as he could.

The doorway clicked open. The visitor walked through and into an elevator. The panel flashed the number five. Sailgood had already managed to take off one glove and was working on the other one. He finally stepped into a spacious lobby.

In front of him stood a smiling African-American girl.

'Good to see you, Deborah,' said Sailgood.

'Always a pleasure, Sir Jack.'

They shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Sailgood had been on these premises many times before. He knew some of the employees too. Many were Russian, American and British lawyers specializing in business and criminal law in places such as Kazakhstan, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. Each door bore the name of one of the countries. Sailgood knew that all these sections had one thing in common and that this thing was Tom Deutsch. The man had unlimited access to information and reported to no one. No

one within the Winston and Partners structure, that is. So free was his hand that the company's CEO, Ronald Van Zandt was mildly uncomfortable with Tom's, as he once put it, satanic presence.

They stopped in front of the door with the tag Tom Deutsch, Director of International Operations. Deborah knocked twice and a raucous voice followed by a cough answered: 'Come in.'

Deborah opened the door and Sailgood stepped in. 'You don't need me?' she asked.

Deutsch coughed some more, nodded and waved his hand. Deborah left the room and closed the door.

'Hello, Jack,' said Deutsch, getting up from his chair to welcome him.

'Good to see you, Tom,' Sailgood shook the offered hand.

'Take a seat.'

Sailgood took off his coat, threw it, along with his fur hat and gloves, onto one armchair and sat in the other. 'You should stop smoking, Tom,' he said, watching his host try to squeeze a cigarette out of a pack even before he put out the previous one.

'Stop, you say?' Deutsch lit the cigarette and inhaled a good lungful of smoke. 'You know – he exhaled – in this city you must be eternally grateful to providence if you don't start abusing drugs... and I mean real drugs like coke, heroin or industrial quantities of vodka.'

Deutsch took another drag, took his time and exhaled: 'I'll quit smoking when I get out of here.'

'Listen to me,' said Sailgood, 'this requires your full attention.'

The American dropped the cigarette into the ashtray and put both his hands on the desk.

'I think I found a way we can strengthen our man's claim to the office in Moscow,' said Sailgood.

'I'm all ears.'

'We traced a jewel that belonged to the Romanovs,' said Sailgood. 'The jewel went missing after the Revolution, but it seems to have surfaced and is causing some commotion now. Someone wants a piece of the Russian action.'

'Russian action?' said Deutsch and took another drag. 'I thought we already had plenty of Russian action? What are you saying?'

'The jewel can facilitate the instalment of our man in Moscow.'

‘Kaganov is ready,’ said Deutsch. ‘He needs to take care of a couple of tiny details himself and we can then proceed with the most colourful and joyful of all the merry revolutions, the one at Red Square.’

‘I have always admired your spirit, Tom. I just hope and pray it won’t go as pear shaped as it did in the Ukraine.’

‘The Ukraine was a cock-up. The locals are too incompetent and greedy even by Eastern European standards. The Russians are serious people, though. Bigger crooks but reliable in their crookedness. Anyway, you know what I mean. Utterly ruthless and professional. One must give credit where credit is due,’ Deutsch announced solemnly. ‘So, where is this wonderful jewel?’

‘Somewhere in Mexico, it seems,’ said Sailgood.

‘I thought you said you’d traced it?’

‘Well, we traced its existence, that is.’ Sailgood shrugged his shoulders.

‘And where does this metaphysical trail take us, you said?’

‘To Mexico.’

‘Mexico? As in the big chunk of land south of El Paso, Texas that’s home to some hundred and twenty million people?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you care to give me some... more refined information?’

‘It was last seen in the possession of the artist Frida Kahlo. That’s all we know, I’m afraid.’

‘So, you should be,’ said Deutsch. ‘Afraid, I mean... that Kahlo woman died a century ago!’

‘In 1954, to be precise,’ said Sailgood.

‘And how do you suggest we trace this jewel?’

‘Well, Tom, it sits on your territory, you see...’

‘I see,’ said Deutsch with a smug smile. ‘We have made some progress, yes.’

Tom Deutsch and Jack Sailgood went back a long time. They could argue about their methods perhaps, but never about core interests or the direction of travel. They also had a little business venture to take care of.

‘Jack,’ said Deutsch, ‘the news from Africa is not good. Mugabe is gone and our little operation at Marange is seriously jeopardized. These new military people seem to be backed by China. The Kimberly Commission is intensifying the pressure on the UN to kick Zimbabwe out and the Africa-Canada Group published a report documenting illegal traffic in diamonds. The value of the black-market trade was set at two billion dollars.’

Sailgood knew that the Marange operation was in jeopardy. What he didn’t know, though, was where Deutsch was going with this line of thinking. Did he have a new scheme in mind?

‘So, Africa is in the focus of international public opinion and human rights organizations. Not to mention the World Health Organization and even the Band Aid projects,’ said Deutsch and started coughing and/or laughing. ‘Harare is now bad for business.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes, which brings me to my point, Jack,’ said Deutsch. ‘Have you had the chance to read this morning’s papers?’

‘The Russian papers?’

‘Yes, the Russian papers.’

‘Haven’t had the time, this jewel affair took away all my time and imagination.’

‘Good,’ said Deutsch, ‘Then I can inform you that the Director of the Institute for Geology and Mineralogy in Novosibirsk held a press conference last night at which he announced their newest and most glorious find: a crater in the middle of Siberia. It’s called Khatanga and it holds enough diamonds to meet the needs of the world market for the next three hundred years.’

‘Say that again,’ said Sailgood.

‘Diamonds, asteroid crater, Siberia, three hundred years... lots of diamonds...’ said Deutsch. ‘Ponimayesh?’

‘Da,’ said Sailgood, ‘ponimayu. Are you trying to tell me that Garriburton Global is about to leave the warm climate of Africa and plunge head on into the frozen tundra of Siberia?’

‘That’s right, my friend,’ said Deutsch. ‘We need to accept the new geopolitical reality and get a seat at the main table. This is going to be big, Jack, very big.’

‘But Tom...’

‘Listen to me. Africa is compromised and it is only a matter of time before the whole operation comes under the control of the local state administration and the international trade organizations. Too much visibility equals too much regulation equals less profit and more risk. And for that or even lower risk we can go after the main prize.’

‘Siberia?’

‘Siberia.’

‘Does Siberia involve less risk? We could continue to work directly with the Harare regime, whatever and whoever that is. These new military people could be interested in acting as guarantors of our investments.’

‘Don’t hold your breath, Jack. It’s just another coup in Africa, business and chaos as usual. It will take a decade to settle down. I’m telling you, we’re out.’

‘I see,’ said Sailgood. ‘Did you mention a Scotch by any chance?’

‘I didn’t but it’s always a good idea.’ Deutsch got from his chair to pick up a bottle and two glasses from the cabinet. ‘Kentucky Bourbon, if you don’t mind.’

‘I don’t,’ said Sailgood as Deutsch poured the drinks.

‘To our future,’ said the American raising his glass.

‘To Khatanga.’ Sailgood downed the drink. ‘Do you have any idea of the cost of such operations? We are not talking superficial mining here. It’s not about a couple of picks, shovels and a bunch of semi-naked natives guarded by uniformed criminals. We are talking about an asteroid-made crater that’s likely to be ten miles wide...’

‘Make it sixty.’

‘Sixty miles and God knows how many miles deep, in the middle of the Siberian frozen tundra, which happens to be in the biggest country on the planet that is protected by the largest stock pile of nuclear weapons and one of the meanest and toughest armies in the world... and under the watchful eyes of the most feared state security agency in the world, the FSB.’

‘Well,’ began Deutsch, ‘no one said it would be easy, but once our man Kaganov is in office, all the interesting chunks of the country will be up for sale, and thanks to our generous and unselfish support we will be at the head of the line. Most international companies will run for the usual oil, gas and gold, and they will enjoy the full protection of the government assets you just mentioned. It will be a perfectly legitimate enterprise.’

‘Why? Do we begin paying taxes?’

‘No, of course not. When you are paying the bribes, you don’t have to pay the taxes as well. And yes, after the first phase we will not pay for anything anymore, for we will own the place.’

‘Will we?’

‘Yes, the local Khatanga tribes are the Dalgan and the Nganasan. Their ethnicity, language, culture and human rights have been heavily suppressed by the Russians for centuries now. And not only are they unhappy with Moscow’s lack of investment in the area, they are looking for some foreign sponsorship.’

‘I see,’ said Sailgood. ‘Just one tiny detail. Where do we find the sort of money needed to start this operation?’

‘It’s not where,’ said Deutsch. ‘It’s who.’

‘Fine. Who would that be?’

‘That will be one José Saldero Medina,’ said Deutsch, not without pride.

‘The Mexican drug lord?’

‘You are getting too old for this line of work, Jack. Too old, too sensitive and waaay too judgmental. Señor Medina is a wealthy businessman looking for an opportunity to invest his hard-earned cash and we happen to be in the ideal position to help him achieve his main objective. It’s as simple as that: no politics, no ideology, just good business.’ Excited by this little speech, Deutsch started wheezing, coughed for a bit, then hastily lit another cigarette. The wheezing subsided. ‘Do you have any idea, Jack, how much the North American drug market is worth? Do you have any idea?’

‘Several billion, I would guess.’

‘Make it more like fifty, sixty perhaps,’ said Deutsch, puffing out a cloud of smoke. ‘Fifty billion of newly hatched green American dollars that need to find a safe place to copulate and produce more green American dollars.’

‘I can’t see anything wrong in that,’ said Sailgood.

‘Of course not. The US Treasury Department prints the money, we collect it and reinvest. That’s what I call a sound business model and, at the same time, a paradigm shift in terms of global strategy.’

‘Let’s get back to the beginning of this story for a moment.’

‘Let’s do that,’ agreed Deutsch.

‘To make any of these things possible, we need Kaganov in the Kremlin.’

‘Sounds about right, yes.’

‘And to strengthen Kaganov’s position we need the jewel, the Russian Soul, correct?’

‘We do need the jewel.’

‘Any idea how to find it? It’s on your patch.’

‘Sure, I have ideas,’ said Deutsch and pressed a button on his office phone. ‘Deborah, will you please get our man in El Paso on the line... when? Now. I want to talk to him now!’ He then turned to Sailgood and raised his glass: ‘To the new Red Square revolution.’

‘What’s the timeline?’ said Sailgood, coughing and after too big a gulp of his drink.

‘Our man is ready to return to Mother Russia and lead the democratic forces into the final battle against the last bastion of the post-Soviet, neo-communist, misogynist, homophobic and backward forces,’ said Deutsch and downed the content of his glass.

‘The Romanovs are now fully rehabilitated and the Russian Orthodox Church have canonized them. Unfortunately, they have no living heirs so the whole thing is largely abstract, metaphorical. They are just recycling the myth, the legend...’ said Sailgood. ‘That’s why we need the Russian Soul.’

‘You mean the jewel?’

‘Yes, the Tsar was replaced by Lenin, then came Stalin and then a long line of faceless apparatchiks. This is a vast country, but full of superstitious, God-fearing people. Russians understand one type of government only, the one that tells them what to do. Our friend Myshkin knows that very well and plays the card of the father of the nation. Alexey Kaganov is right. The jewel is sacred. It holds magical powers.’

‘Why would a jewel lost somewhere in Mexico be sacred and magical?’ said Deutsch with a wry smile.

‘It’s called alchemy, Tom. All we need to do is to surround the jewel with an aura of mysticism, sophistication and glory. Just picture Kaganov, the great leader of the Russian world, the one who will restore the glory of the Tsars, bring peace and prosperity to the masses from the Elbe in the west to the Yenisei in the east, from the Arctic to Mongolia. Kaganov will sit at the table with the Europeans and the Americans and lead Russia from the steps of Asia into the heart of the civilized world of Paris, London and New York.’

‘OK, I get your point,’ said Deutsch. ‘But you’re missing a tiny detail aren’t you?’

‘What?’ said Sailgood.

‘We don’t have the jewel, do we?’

VI

A black Hummer rolled down the Avenida del Trionfo towards the centre of Ciudad Juárez on Mexico's northern border. Behind the driver sat a man with a hefty moustache. He wore a dark blue jacket over a flowery yellow shirt and wide lapels. Under the jacket, tucked into his belt, was a Colt .38, its grip engraved Pancho on one side and Villa on the other. In the passenger seat sat a man tightly clutching an automatic assault rifle. He wore a Texas-style ten-gallon Stetson hat and a pair of sunglasses. A Toyota UV carrying four armed men rolled ahead of them. Three more Toyotas with more firepower drove behind the Hummer. They moved at high speed cutting through traffic and passing through red streetlights.

Ciudad Juárez is a border town in the north Mexican state of Chihuahua, situated on the Rio Grande opposite El Paso, Texas. The town has the highest number of crime-related deaths in the world. Drugs, arms, slaves, prostitution, pornography, smut films, domestic violence, street violence, gang-related violence, gratuitous violence... you name it, Juárez had it. Some claim that the only positive thing about the town was that it wasn't lawless, strictly speaking. The law was enshrined in José Saldero Medina, nicknamed the handsome one - El Guapo, the man on the back seat of the Hummer. Next to him was his trusted lawyer and adviser Ignacio Ituribe. On the passenger seat was Gonzalo Nieto de Pachenga. 'Paco, para los amigos', he liked to say, though he never had any friends.

The motorcade rolled down Avenida del Trionfo and turned right into Camino de la Rosita, a narrow one-way street. El Guapo's vehicle stopped in front of a discrete and unassuming neon sign that read 'Barrigas - *Restaurante tradicional.*' El Guapo jumped down from the vehicle and stood on the pavement with a mobile phone in his hand while Pachenga and three other men stomped through the entrance to the restaurant. When his right-hand man gave the all-clear signal, El Guapo stomped in too, followed by Ituribe. They passed by a petrified maître d' and walked into the main dining hall where they were met by the proprietor, the cringing, bowing Antonio Barrigas. El Guapo looked around at the patrons. Most of them

nearly dropped their cutlery and glasses. They stopped drinking and talking. Some stopped breathing too.

‘The Blue Room...’ mumbled Barrigas. ‘The Blue Room is set for you, your favourite.’

Medina didn’t pay much attention to the proprietor. He stood in the middle of the restaurant’s main hall and wished everyone a good evening. He apologized for such a rude interruption and mentioned that he would, of course, pay all their bills. Ituribe stood behind him and looked bored. El Guapo congratulated everyone on the choice of the restaurant as this was the pearl of Chihuahua and the envy of many a Texan Gringo. He then invited all the *hermosas señoras y estimados caballeros* to order drinks and food as they wished for they were now, of course, special guests of the *pobre cristiano* José El Guapo Medina. He smiled, shook the hands of a couple of patrons and promenaded towards the Blue Room. As soon as El Guapo left the hall, Pachenga explained that for reasons of security he would like everyone to drop their mobile devices into his men’s sacks. A couple of ladies in different corners screamed and Ituribe shook his head. Indeed, the one thing that the Harvard educated Ignacio Ituribe could not stomach was Pachenga’s lack of grace and panache. It made his stomach churn.

Once in the Blue Room, El Guapo approached the table and took a Cuban cigar out of his pocket. He placed it on the table and next to it a cigar cutter and a lighter. He took off his jacket and put it over the back of his chair, then pulled the gun out and laid it within reach on the right-hand side of the table. Ituribe took a seat opposite his, dropped a folder he had been carrying next to his plate and put a silver cigarette case on top of it.

‘What can I bring you, señor Medina?’ Barrigas said.

‘How about something refreshing?’ said El Guapo. ‘We are thirsty.’

‘Do you want me to bring you a jug of water with ice, mint and lemon?’ asked Barrigas with a bow.

‘I didn’t say I was dirty, you peon. I said I was thirsty! Bring me a jug of *Marguerita Chamoyada* and an iced tea for this miserable creature here,’ croaked out Medina, nodding at Ituribe who was playing with his cigarette case. ‘And I want to order food now, *rápido!*’

‘Sí, señor,’ said Barrigas and took out his notebook and pencil. He was ready. He wasn’t breathing too well, perhaps, but he was ready to take the order.

‘Give me a plate of *tomates rellenos*, then a couple of *quesadillas* with *Poblano* chillies and mushrooms, *tacos* with fish and *Chipotle* chillies... then, but only once I have finished with

the appetizers, I want an *Arrachera*, a *Brocheta de filete* and...' Medina stopped in mid-sentence and directed a penetrating gaze at Barrigas, '...are the meats locally sourced or imported from Texas?'

'From Chihuahua, Chihuahua...' cried the restaurateur as if his life depended on it. Perhaps it did. 'Local, all local, I personally go to the market every morning and buy local produce.'

'Good man,' said El Guapo, flashing his impeccable, Hollywood-white teeth. Barrigas hazarded a guess that it was a smile. He showed his own teeth in return and bowed. Juan Barrigas had lived long enough in Ciudad Juárez to be able to smell danger, and danger incarnate came in the shape of José Medina, the Emperor of Drugs, whose operations extended to Afghanistan, New York and beyond, spreading its tentacles into the nerve centres of world power, the dark corners of governments and shady global enterprises. Barrigas had come over to Mexico as a young man from the Spanish Extremadura region which produced Hernán Cortés, the conquistador of the Aztecas. All his life he had tried hard to lose his Iberian accent and he was now trying harder than ever.

'Good man, and bring me a bottle of the Sangre de Cortés, ha, ha... The Spanish bastard drank enough Aztec blood so it's time for us to repay the courtesy. Don't you agree, amigo?' said Medina, flashing his white teeth at Barrigas, who bowed lower than before and again managed to produce a semblance of a smile.

'Bring a jug of water too, for this valiant servant of mine,' said El Guapo and nodded towards Ituribe, 'and to eat?'

'Hm,' said the advisor. He had just extracted a pinch of white powder from his cigarette holder, 'for me a salad, a Caesar salad.'

'A salad,' said El Guapo. 'Give him a salad, a salad!'

'Muchas gracias,' said Barrigas, and retreated in a hurry with his precious notebook.

'Stop sniffing and start talking to me,' said El Guapo, picking up a knife from the table to play with. He noticed a large tear drop coming out of the corner of his advisor's eye.

'Hm... our source in the Pentagon confirmed...' said Ituribe closing the silver cigarette case, '...that the US administration is serious about downsizing their military presence in Afghanistan.'

'Hijos de puta,' said El Guapo and hit the table with his fist, 'gratitude, is this what they call it, gratitude?'

'Hm, Johnson pledged to secure our interests in the country post American withdrawal.'

'Tell the Yanks to get stuffed. I've had enough of their drivel. No, don't tell them anything, just get in touch with those Taliban gentlemen we've been talking to. Let's talk some business.'

As he said 'Taliban,' the door opened and a waitress brought in a tray with the drinks. The business conversation stopped. Barrigas brought the Sangre de Cortés, uncorked the bottle and poured a sip of the red wine in a glass. El Guapo waved a hand at him in a circular motion for him to fill it. 'Skip the niceties, old man.'

'Talk to me some more,' he said once the door closed.

'Well, the Gringo from El Paso is asking for two things.'

'I already don't like it... asking is too presumptuous, don't you think, *abogado?*'

'Pleading,' Ituribe corrected himself, 'he's pleading, begging for a meeting to discuss a possible joint venture. It would take care of our cash flow problem - on a permanent basis.'

'I'm all ears,' said El Guapo and picked up the wine glass.

'He didn't give me any details but implied a global business venture and gave me two key words, Russia; and...'

'And?'

'... diamonds.'

'Interesting,' said El Guapo. 'Diamonds are always interesting. And what's the second plea?'

'To find a jewel.'

'Me, to find a jewel?'

'It's in Mexico, the legend has it.'

'How are these two pleas related?' asked El Guapo, pouring some more wine. 'Sangre de Cortés. Let's drink some more Spanish blood!'

'We find the jewel,' said Ituribe, 'and bring it to the table as our ticket to the big party.'

'How big... this party?'

'Three hundred years' worth of diamond supplies for the whole world,' said Ituribe.

‘Ok, let’s find the stupid jewel, and...’ El Guapo started to say when Pachenga stormed into the room holding a mobile phone.

‘Traitors and hijos de putas,’ he said waving the phone. ‘An army column is on its way!’

El Guapo jumped on his feet. He put on the jacket, snatched his smoking paraphernalia up from the table and collected his gun. He walked out of the room followed by Ituribe. In the main dining hall, two of his men already stood at the exit waiting for him. As he moved through the room someone dropped a piece of cutlery. Faster than his men, El Guapo turned towards the table the sound came from and fired four shots at the two men sitting there. The ladies in their company screamed and raised their hands. One held a knife and a fork, the other a spoon. The two men lay immobile on the floor.

‘Sorry,’ said El Guapo. ‘I am in a bit of a hurry.’

He walked out of the door and onto the street and jumped into the Hummer.

‘Let’s go,’ he yelled as Ituribe throwing himself onto the back seat, ‘*hijos de puta y cabrónes, chingada madre, hijo de perra...*’

‘What happened?’ said Ituribe while Pachenga was yelling orders to the driver.

‘That piece of shit of...’ said El Guapo. ‘I hate traitors! I hate traitors more than rattlesnakes, more than rats and scorpions put together. When I get hold of that son of a bitch, I will feed him to the rats and wild dogs. I will...’

‘I see,’ said Ituribe, shrugging his shoulders.

‘Remind me to send to Pablo Escorrial a birthday present. That son of a rattle snake, filthy treacherous dog...’

‘Escorrial,’ repeated Ituribe. ‘Of course.’

The column of vehicles moved out of the narrow Camino de la Rosita and sped up the Aucatlán boulevard towards the south and El Guapo’s headquarters, a large mansion turned into a fortress.

‘I want to talk to that son of a bitch now. Find him or I’ll come find him myself!’ said El Guapo on the phone before turning to Ituribe, ‘*abogado*, remind me to cut Escorrial’s balls off. I pay him good money to buy haciendas, private jets, women and votes... useless, he is useless.’

‘Sure,’ said Ituribe. ‘I will remind you to cut off his balls. After his birthday, I presume?’

‘Right,’ said El Guapo. ‘What were you saying about Russians and diamonds?’

‘I said that we should find that jewel and take it to London.’

‘London? Why London?’

‘That’s where the meeting is taking place.’

‘OK, Russians and diamonds,’ said El Guapo. ‘Smells like money and feels like money. What can I say. Let’s find that silly jewel and we are off to London. I’ve had enough of the desert!’

VII

The compartment shook. The engine droned on to the accompaniment of distant thunder. Uniformed men sat tightly packed together on a narrow bench, their backs against the bare metal fuselage. They stamped their heavy boots against the floor, puffed on cigarettes and laughed while the engine noise grew louder. Laughter and kit rattling. One of the men showed his teeth. He clapped his hand against his knee, then laughed some more while wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He elbowed the man next to him and they both laughed and grinned. The engines roared and the boots kept stomping while behind the row of tiny round windows red lights flashed on and off. Suddenly, the laughter faded away and an eerie kind of cold penetrated the bones. It felt cold, ice-cold. He jumped out and plummeted, plummeted...

He jumped up and sat in the bed. He wiped the sweat off his forehead clawing his way out of the dream. Had he screamed? He recognized the few pieces of simple furniture, the high ceiling and the tall Victorian windows. No more uniformed men or engine roar, no more stamping boots. He was back to his home galaxy, like so many times before. Next to him, under the bedcover, was a slim body, on the pillow a curl of brown hair. The cover rose and fell slightly, rhythmically, the breathing silent.

‘Is she asleep?’ he wondered. ‘I never know if she is asleep or not. It’s a mystery to me.’

The digital alarm clock on the windowsill read seven o’clock. He got out of bed. He’d had enough sleep; five to six hours was plenty for him. Deep inside he had always been a believer in staying awake and alert. The body of the Buddha appears to be immobile while his spirit is everywhere, Gorsky mused.

Barefoot, he moseyed up to the window and pulled aside the blind. Outside, the street was misty and windy. A streetlamp cast light onto the road lined with parked cars, where a sanitation worker pushed back in place a couple of bins and rushed on. He wore a yellow jacket, had short, blond hair and probably spoke Lithuanian at home. Across the street, a man shut the

front door behind him, checked his wristwatch, switched on the tiny player strapped to his arm and set off jogging. In his childhood, Gorsky remembered, he liked to get up early and prepare his books for school, to have breakfast, to start running before touching the ground while the others were still busying themselves with their shoelaces.

As he left the room, he heard a whimper. He closed the door behind him. In the bathroom, he washed his face and brushed his teeth. He opened the door of the living room and said, ‘Shut up, Knyaz!’ to a large Samoyed dog who got up on his hind legs and placed his paws on his master’s shirt. Gorsky patted the animal on the head and they went together to the tiny kitchen where he filled a tin bowl with the contents of a box of dog food to which he added some milk. While Knyaz was happily munching his meal, Gorsky retreated to the corridor, closed the door and went into a room that was equipped with a treadmill, a rowing machine, a collection of dumbbells and other sporting equipment. He put his running gear on, hopped on the treadmill and touched the screen: six miles an hour, then eight, ten, twelve. After fifteen minutes he jumped off, sat down on the rowing machine and pressed the P1 option on the screen: program one. He bent his knees, extended his arms, picked up the handle, straightened his back and pulled. He pulled hard, with his legs first, then with the back and finally with the arms – the way Pat, the rowing coach, had taught him. Thirty minutes at resistance rate eight, eighteen strokes per minute, one minute and forty-five seconds per five hundred meters split: P1. There was also a P2 and a P4 but those were competition modes. P1 was well suited for contemplation and problem solving – a metaphysical mode.

Gorsky worked part-time as an instructor of Russian Systema, a martial arts technique. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the ban on teaching the Systema was lifted and many former KGB and SPETSNAZ agents who had left the country began teaching it. For Gorsky, teaching martial arts was a way to keep his reflexes sharp and to earn a couple of extra pounds on top of what he was making as a security guard for Aleksey Kaganov. He taught at a local Kung Fu school, but had private clients too. Clients like the American Air Force Base at Lakenheath, in Suffolk. He liked to ‘throw the Yanks around.’ They called him Boris, or sometimes Ivan, or the Ivan. Some called him Stripes, for he always wore his Russian military shirt - his *telnyashka*, with narrow light blue and white horizontal stripes, in the style used by paratroopers.

He kept this room locked. It was his private corner. His dwellings were temporary anyway, They were just a compromise, a soldier's bivouac. Like some animal species, he preferred to eat alone. He liked his training and his routine. There was a room in his flat that no one had ever entered. There was also his springtime trip: every April he would take off from work and vanish for three weeks. He never spoke about his whereabouts during this period and whether he was among Siberian rivers, Scottish Highlands or Norwegian fjords. In the wilderness he felt at home.

It was s all about speed, he believed. Not the speed of a train, plane or bullet but about the speed of light. He needed solitude and quiet to refocus. He would sit still for hours on end, observing mountains and wild animals.

His girlfriend Kathy once asked him if he ever passed classified information to the Americans. 'Nothing that you can't find on the Internet,' he'd replied. 'It's funny, you see, they ask me all sorts of questions – soldiers and officers alike. They want to know about weapons, tactics, combat readiness and morale, endurance training and martial arts... They ask everything except the most obvious and the most important question.'

'Like what?' asked Kathy.

'Like, how come I speak English so well? Did I learn it at school or in the army? Do I speak other languages too perhaps? Was I trained in skills other than languages? Why was I trained and how many of us were there in that specific program? They never thought of asking the essential question. Shame on them.'

'Would you have told them?'

'That specific bit of information is not to be found on the Internet, is it?'

As he was reaching the twenty-fifth minute of the rowing P1 drill the door opened and a long, smiling face with a pair of lively dark eyes appeared through the gap.

'Morning, rower,' she said and waved to catch Gorsky's attention.

'Hi,' he said taking his eyes off the machine's display. 'Morning, honey!'

'Breakfast in ten minutes, because I have to go,' said the young woman.

'Sure,' said Gorsky, increasing the number of strokes to thirty-six, lowering his split time to under a minute and thirty seconds. Rowing across the Mediterranean, from Sicily to Libya and back in five minutes.

The small table in the lounge, just outside the tiny kitchen, was set for breakfast. Bacon and eggs, bread, butter and yoghurt for Gorsky, wholegrain cereal for Kathy. And coffee, of course: Turkish for him and decaf with soy milk for her.

‘Good,’ said Gorsky, taking a seat at the table and drawing his chair closer to the plate. He had completed his jog and his P1 session, had a shower, put a clean shirt on. He looked, smelled and felt good.

Kathy squeezed the mug in her hands: ‘Let me recap,’ she said, ‘I need to understand this. You, Kolya and an Italian are in Rome with Zakhar who has business with the Saint Egidio Foundation. The last evening, before departure, Zakhar and his wife dine in his favourite restaurant. Kolya and the Italian go with them.’

‘Yes,’ said Gorsky while spreading butter on a slice of bread.

‘Now, you weren’t there with them because the Boss asked you to fetch that parcel from the antiquarian, yes?’

‘He asked me to fetch only one item,’ said Gorsky, tucking into the bacon.

‘The sword. OK, fine. But once in the shop you are told that there is another item for you to pick up.’

‘Yes.’

‘The letters, right. You pick up these things and walk across the city to the restaurant,’ said Kathy. Gorsky nodded, chewing.

‘As you approach the place you see a shadow and stop. You see Zakhar and his wife in front of the restaurant. The shadow comes out into the light and you recognize the Italian. He approaches the two and shoots them.’

‘Yes,’ said Gorsky. He took a sip of the coffee and leaned back in the chair.

‘You run towards the spot with your gun out and the man turns towards you. You throw yourself on the ground, he shoots at you, misses and you get up and shoot him. At the same time, though, the man is hit by something that takes half his head off.

‘A large-calibre sniper round,’ said Gorsky.

‘Right. You hide behind a parked car. The shooter disappears. You check Kolya, Zakhar, Irina... All dead. You run. Why? Why did you not stay to talk to the police?’

‘The Boss wouldn’t want me to,’ said Gorsky.

‘Why not?’

‘No exposure to law enforcement agencies or media,’ said Gorsky. ‘That’s the golden rule. It’s part of the job, it says so in the contract.’

‘They will be after you, you know? Not that hard to identify the third security man and trace him down.’

‘I know, but that was supposed to be the Boss’s problem. He takes care of the police, the media and the politicians.’

‘The Boss...’ said Kathy and took a long sip of the decaf. ‘Except that the Boss is dead now.’

‘Yes.’

‘So, where does that leave you?’

‘That leaves me with the letters and a sword.’

‘What are the letters about?’

‘Agathon Fabergé’s letters.’

‘Fabergé, the jeweller?’ said Kathy.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Gorsky not without surprise. ‘Why do women always seem to know stuff about precious stones?’ he dared to ask.

‘You don’t want to know, darling,’ quipped Kathy. ‘Why would the Boss be interested in hundred-year-old letters?’

‘Because of a thing called *Russkaya Dusha*, it seems.’

‘As in Russian soul, spirit?’

‘No, as in the jewel.’

‘There’s a Fabergé jewel called the Russian Soul and the Boss wanted it...’ said Kathy squeezing one eye as if aiming at a target, ‘... only to give it away as a present to Milla Ivanovna?’

‘Maybe,’ said Gorsky, shrugging his shoulders. ‘But it gets even better.’

‘Does it?’ said Kathy as she took another sip of the decaf.

‘The jewel is supposed to be one of the famous Easter eggs that Nikolai II , commissioned for his wife and mother over a number of years. Senka tells me that these eggs are all well known, but that this one – the Russian Soul – is not listed. As if it didn’t exist.’

‘So, the dead Boss who wants to become president is after a non-existent Fabergé Easter egg jewel?’ said Kathy setting down her empty mug.

‘Something like that,’ said Gorsky.

‘I see. But it gets even better, doesn’t it?’ said Kathy. Gorsky placed both hands on the table and got ready to listen.

‘Someone just killed Vatayev, Irina and Kolya, right? And that someone knows that you are the only witness to the murders... that someone might be looking for you now, as we speak.’

‘Might be,’ said Gorsky.

‘So, what are you going to do?’

‘See Milla Ivanovna...’

‘The grieving, widowed wife.’ Kathy scoffed.

‘...and give her the letters and the sword. I also need to talk to her. She must know something.’

‘Even if she did, why would she tell you?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Gorsky. ‘My good friend and two other people I knew were killed. The Boss is dead too. These are exceptional circumstances.’

‘How big?’ said Kathy moving the mug from one place on the table to another.

‘Really big, Kathy,’ said Gorsky. ‘The Boss was one of the richest men on the planet. What could be big or important enough to rattle him?’

Knyaz got up from his corner with his tongue lolling, wagged his tail and growled as if he had a say in the matter.

‘You’re right,’ said Gorsky to the dog. ‘And you have no idea just how right you are.’

‘I have to go,’ said Kathy looking at her mobile phone. ‘Oh, yes. You might want to know that Milla Ivanovna confirmed this morning’s massage session. After all she’s in mourning and I am sure she wants to look her best at the funeral.’ She stood up from the table, dropped her plate and mug in the sink and picked up her coat from the hanger.

‘Call me tonight,’ he said.

‘Will do,’ she said and kissed him on the cheek. ‘Take care. They are bad. These are very bad, evil people.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry. Trust me.’

‘I was afraid you would say that,’ Kathy said managing to produce a faint smile. She touched his hand gently and rushed out of the door.

As soon as the sound of Kathy's steps faded away, Gorsky got up to clear the table. He put the dishes in the sink, the butter in the fridge. Something was wrong, however. Knyaz wagged his tail and the water flowed into the sink as the radio announced a windy day. And yet, that smell of rot was present, lodged in his nostrils. He knew it well. He had learnt to sniff it out, like Knyaz would do, like any animal would do. The dishwashing liquid was making lots of foam, a cloud of foam, when the mobile rang.

'It's been confirmed, Alex,' cried Senka Golovkin. 'The Boss is dead. The car collided with a truck and fell off a cliff. Milla Ivanovna flew there in the middle of the night to identify the body.'

'And?'

'She made a positive identification,' said Golovkin breathing heavily. 'I am going to see Milla Ivanovna now; she just came back and she's at home now. I'll be in touch,' said Senka and terminated the call.

Gorsky was left standing in front of the sink overflowing with white, warm dishwashing liquid foam.

Under the watchful eye of the dog, he used a kitchen towel to dry his hands and rushed to the laptop on the living room couch. He logged in and started browsing the daily news headlines: Aleksey Kaganov recently asked to be permitted to return to Russia; FSB, the Russian Secret Police has a hand in the Oligarch's Death? Before Death Oligarch Writes to Russian President Asking for Permission to Visit Mother Hospitalised in Moscow; The Kremlin Behind Oligarch Death – Suggests Source Close to Russian Diplomats; Friends of Late Tycoon Tell Reporter of Recent Nervous Breakdown; After Zakharov's Murder, Kaganov Dies in Car Crash – Coincidence? The Trail Leads to the Kremlin.

He checked his e-mails. It was the usual rubbish plus a mail from the gym about his next session, a communication from the landlord about a heating issue, and eventually, a mail from someone completely unknown, someone called Rose.

'What kind of rubbish is this, now?' thought Gorsky and was just about to press enter and dispose of the message when he realised that the name was written in Cyrillic: *Роза*.

A Russian woman looking for a husband? He clicked on the icon to open the e-mail. It was in Russian and very brief: 'Find the Russian Soul.'

It was signed, *Роза* – Rose.

VIII

Gorsky cast a glance at the kitchen clock. It was time to take Knyaz out for his evening walk. He put on his heavy trekking boots, the coat, and hat. He attached the lead to the dog and picked up the case with the sword. They came down to the second floor where he knocked on a door. A plump woman with a watering can in her hand opened the door. She wore a long robe with a flowery pattern.

‘Hello, Alex,’ she said and leaned to pat the dog. ‘I heard the sad news this morning!’

‘Yes, terrible news, Mrs Paraskevi.’ Said Gorsky. ‘You mean the Boss, right? Kaganov’s car crash?’

‘Yes, of course I mean that,’ said the woman. ‘What happened to him?’

‘I don’t know much myself. I’ve just received the information from a friend, a colleague from work; he told me of the accident and said the police was handling the case. It is not treated as a suspicious death. My friend, I mean, my colleague said.’

‘I see,’ said Mrs Paraskevi, ‘Terrible, terrible... Do you want to come in?’

‘No, thanks. I wanted to ask your husband, Mr Stavros, to have a look at an item I brought from Rome the other day.’

‘Yes, sure,’ said Mrs Paraskevi.

‘Here it is,’ said Gorsky and passed the case to the woman. ‘It’s a sword that I brought over from Rome. It’s quite old and precious, the antiquarian said. I just wanted your husband’s opinion on it. He’s the expert.’

‘Of course,’ said Mrs Paraskevi, ‘I’ll pass it to Stavros. He’ll be more than happy to have a look at it.’

‘Thanks,’ said Gorsky. He proceeded down the stairs and onto Kingston Street. At the first corner, he turned right towards Mill Road and soon reached Parker’s Piece, a large patch

of grass in the heart of town. It was the dog's favourite spot and Gorsky was happy to unleash him and throw a tennis ball around.

The Moustakas were Greeks who had lived in Britain since the late eighties. The wife was from Thessaloniki in mainland Greece and the husband was a Cypriot from Nicosia. Sometimes they disagreed about accents, expressions and names for things or food items but they had in common one thing, though. One was never to mention the Turks in their presence. Not even ask for a Turkish coffee or baklava. No, in the presence of the Moustakas, you were never to mention the Turks.

Mr Stavros owned a small antiques shop in town. Before he started the business, he was a curator at the British Museum, well versed in Medieval and Renaissance warfare. He was a good person to seek an opinion from. Gorsky didn't believe Pincherle's stories. On the other hand, he couldn't quite understand why the Boss would want to buy a phony sword. But, hey, the Boss was so predictably unpredictable. It was part of his game, his 'deadly charm'.

'Unpredictable is good,' Kaganov told Gorsky on more than one occasion. 'Once people start thinking you behave erratically and call you capricious, you know you're doing fine. Friends and enemies should be kept guessing. Fear also helps. Instil fear in people. That's good for business!'

In ten minutes, Gorsky and Knyaz reached the intersection of Mill and East Roads. Kolya, Zakhar, Colonel Vargas, Senka, the old man in Rome... Gorsky's mind was busy trying to restore some order to the events that had taken place in the past couple of days. These were not ordinary events but game changers of the highest order. He felt as if he lacked the key to interpreting such a new reality, though. Like he was sitting in pitch darkness while someone was setting off fireworks.

Parker's Piece was diagonally across the road, which meant crossing two streets to get to the common. Before the intersection on the right at the very corner of the two streets and next to the abandoned Christian Zionist Church there was a small park and a playground. At its entrance, on a white, plastic chair sat a man selling pins, badges, balloons and daffodils. His hair was long and white. He wore an aged coat that looked colourful thanks to the many items he sported on the lapels and sleeves.

Gorsky stopped in front of the man and bought another Union Jack pin. He had already bought many of his pins and badges. They had spoken a couple of times. George, he said his

name was, was an ex-serviceman. He had fought in the Falklands where he was wounded in the head during a very long, cold night. 'The Argentines shot at us and we shot at them...' he explained once. George had no immediate family or friends. A small pension and lots of memories, that's all he had.

'Useless,' he said '... the past.'

George lived in a shelter for homeless people.

'It's warm there,' he said. 'Once.'

Gorsky would listen and buy another pin or badge. They would say hello and goodbye to each other, nodded their heads. George never asked and Gorsky never said anything about his own experience in Chechnya. He placed a couple of coins in George's tiny collection box and said goodbye.

'God bless you,' George said.

Gorsky held the lead tight and was about to press the large pedestrian button to cross the street when he heard screams and shouts, coming from the playground next to the church. He turned around and spotted a group of hooded youths gathered around a bench. They held Scrumpy Jack cans in their hands and kept taunting a girl and her dog. The light turned green and started beeping for the pedestrians to cross. Knyaz was pulling the lead when one of the hoodies stopped jumping and booted the dog with a powerful right-leg kick. The dog squealed and the girl crouched on the bench. Gorsky jerked the leash back and approached the group. At first, they didn't see him coming. One of the assailants poked the girl with a long stick and laughed wildly. As Gorsky took Knyaz off the lead, one of the hoodies turned around and pointed in his direction.

'Oi, what about you? Mr ...' he said producing a broad, fake smile of semi-rotten teeth.

'*Nyet,*' said Gorsky and hit him on the cheek with the open palm of his right hand. The hoody dropped the can, stumbled and fell over on his back at which point the other three hoodies noticed Gorsky's presence and turned facing him.

'And you, who the fuck are you now?' said the tall hoody with a dirty baseball cap.

'Some sort of a knight, I guess,' said a short one and picked an empty beer bottle up from the pavement.

'Yep, shining armour and all that shit,' concluded the one with the baseball bat.

The girl sat upright on the bench now and her Cocker Spaniel sneaked underneath.

‘I know your smug face,’ said the short hoodie and raced towards Gorsky raising the can. The other three stood in a semi-circle.

‘No, you don’t,’ said Gorsky, moving slightly aside to avoid the attack. He then tightened his big fist and hooked the jaw of the assailant taking him a dozen inches off the ground. As the body landed on the concrete path, Gorsky felt the impact of the baseball bat that hit his shoulder and the back of his head. He grabbed the bat and once he had the man within reach pulled his shirt, brought his face closer and then to an abrupt stop with a head butt. The man’s knees gave in and he fell leaving the baseball bat to Gorsky who turned towards the last two thugs. The tall one with the baseball cap tried to run but was stopped by a mighty kick in the groin that came from the girl who was now standing in the middle of the path in full combat mode. The last member of the gang looked at the girl, then at Gorsky who stood a whole head taller. He turned only to find himself facing Knyaz’ fangs and eager gaze. He yelled a profanity and ran towards the furthest corner of the park.

‘Well, and who are you?’ said the girl standing right in front of Gorsky with a threatening note in her voice.

‘I’ll be fine, it’s nothing,’ said Gorsky and stroked his head. ‘Thank you for asking.’

‘Oh, not only we do like to beat people up but we have a funny streak too. What planet did you just come from and what do you think you are doing? They are my mates, you know?’

‘Nice people, your friends, very nice. Next time when I’m not around you can take them home to your mum and your teddy bear. Nice little friendship you people have there. Sorry for interfering with your games and good bye,’ he said and turned to leave.

‘It did look a bit odd, I must admit. Let me have a look,’ she said grabbing him for an arm. ‘Let me see your head.’

He obliged and she examined the bump.

‘It’s already swollen and there’s a nice cut too. Some blood, not much but still...’

‘I’ll be fine,’ he said trying to step away.

‘Don’t move,’ she was still attending to his wound. ‘You don’t sound like people from round here?’

‘Russian.’

‘Russian, right. I need to fix your head.’

‘My head is fine, thank you.’

‘Nah, come with me. You have some blood in your hair. I live around the corner. Come with me and I can fix your wound and make you a cup of coffee.’

‘No need really...’

‘Shut up and move,’ she said with authority and the matter was settled. They called the dogs, put the leashes on and began walking down Mill Road. The girl spoke and Gorsky listened. She sounded English but looked Arab he thought, or maybe not quite Arab but not Greek, not Spanish. She had big dark eyes able to produce an intense, penetrating stare.

‘By the way, my name is Niusha,’ she said and they shook hands. ‘Alex,’ he mumbled. ‘You’re not from around here?’ he said while they were walking towards Collier Road.

‘Birmingham, if you don’t mind. That’s where I’m from.’

‘That’s fine with me.’

‘Why did you ask?’

‘You asked me first.’

‘Yeah, but you are obviously a foreigner. You behave like a bear in a Ming Dynasty vase shop so I had to ask. That makes sense, right?’

‘Right.’

‘You have a wife at home?’

‘I don’t have a wife at home.’

‘A girlfriend?’ she insisted.

‘A girlfriend what?’

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’

‘I do have a girlfriend, so what?’

‘What’s her name? You will need someone to clean your cut tomorrow.’

‘Her name is Kathy.’

‘What does Kathy do?’

‘Unlike you, she minds her own business.’

‘What does Kathy do, I said. It’s a polite question. Round here we call it a conversation, you see?’

‘She works as a therapist and in her spare time is building a country house of recyclable materials.’

‘Your house?’

‘Her house.’

‘Cool, that’s cool,’ said the girl. ‘She does all of that?’

‘Yes, she does all of that,’ said Gorsky. ‘Are you always so noseey?’

‘Yeah, I am, why? You jumped into my life, remember?’

‘She invested some of her savings in it and hopes to resell the house and maybe earn one for herself.’

‘Right, where did she get the capital to start her business?’

‘Working...’

‘What kind of job?’ she cried and stopped in the middle of the pavement. ‘I see, Kathy was a working girl... you know what that means do you?’

Gorsky stopped and stared at her.

‘I think I know,’ he said. ‘No, she wasn’t that kind of a working girl.’

‘I see, you saved her life as you saved mine tonight, right?’

‘No, you’re not making much sense, you know?’

‘You, big silly hero,’ she said. ‘Do you realise that these morons were my customers? They are morons, that’s clear, but nonetheless, paying customers.’

‘You a working girl too?’ said Gorsky with a triumphant little smile protruding from the corner of his mouth.

‘No, I sell dope,’ she said. ‘Nothing major, you know. A bit of hash here, a bit of grass there, some colourful pills... Fun stuff, you see. I don’t do hardcore. I have principles. I know it might not look that way to you but I have values and principles, big man. You get it?’

‘I get it,’ said Gorsky and nodded.

‘Of course, you do,’ said Niusha. She sounded like someone with serious military training: ‘you come with me and you let me thank you for spoiling my business.’

‘What, where? I can’t go anywhere tonight for...’

‘Sure, sure, you see this corner?’

‘I see that corner.’

‘Come with me,’ she ordered.

IX

‘This WikiLeaks routine is affecting my nerves,’ said Jack Sailgood, putting two pills on his tongue. He took a sip of water and swallowed them while going through a pile of printed papers on his lap. ‘Can you imagine that they managed to intercept an e-mail that contains the words diamonds, Harare and Khatanga in the same paragraph!’

Tom Deutsch sat on the next seat reading from his tablet computer.

‘They can write and publish anything they like, this is a free world we live in. Thanks to people like us, of course,’ said the American.

Their British Airways flight originated from Moscow Sheremetyevo airport and was en route to London Heathrow. Sailgood and Deutsch occupied two seats in the first-class section. They had important work to do, lots of papers to read and lots of problems to solve. They used to fly routinely in their respective agency jets until a WikiLeaks dispatch drew attention to the travel expenses of the British intelligence community, which prompted a couple of Members of Parliament to raise this question and suggest that these expenses be brought in line with the diplomatic service standards. ‘Administration is administration,’ as one MP put it. Flying in the CIA jet was out of the question as eyebrows might be raised about such a cosy proximity. So, here they were in a first-class cabin with one agent occupying the seats in front and the other behind them. The one in front read the ESPN Sports review on a tablet and the one behind was browsing through the latest edition of Country Living dedicated to Shropshire cottages on his mobile phone.

‘Jack,’ said Deutsch, ‘the more dust flies around, the less visible it gets. The WikiLeaks boys and girls are doing a fine job. We should be supporting their work with some funding, if we aren’t already.’

‘Sure, and I guess you suggest we give Edward Snowden a medal for taking all of our NSA dirty laundry to Moscow,’ said Sailgood, dropping the papers onto his lap. ‘It might finally encourage others to step forward and buy tickets for Russia and perhaps China.’

‘Well, well,’ said Deutsch, ‘look who’s talking... you let that Assange terrorist just leisurely move into the London Embassy of his choice and live there peacefully ever after! What do you call that?’

‘We can’t do anything about it except what we are already doing. Block the building and wait for him to come out. International law, sorry.’

‘Holy cow, international law, you say. Did you just say international law? Did I hear you say international law?’ said Deutsch. ‘Let me remind you, my boy. We make laws, we then apply and enforce them. We have the ability and bear the responsibility to tell right from wrong. After all, we are the Free World and the International Community.’

‘So, what do you suggest?’ said Sailgood. ‘That we storm the Knightsbridge Embassy of a foreign country, take the target outside and shoot him in the street?’

‘Oh,’ said the American, ‘you are so melodramatic, so Shakespearian, that you would make it look like a tragedy at the end. No, I am not suggesting anything of the sort. You just have the Embassy stormed and tidied up and you then issue a very polite and civilised statement where you explain that you are terribly sorry for the collateral damage caused but that you had reports that the Queen’s security was compromised and that a terrorist cell was preparing an imminent attack under the auspices of the Ecuadorian Embassy. Done, *finito, Ende!*’

‘I see,’ said the Englishman. ‘The Queen would never agree to it, though.’

‘What do you mean? You are not going to ask her, are you?’

‘Well, you see...’

Deutsch stared at his partner with eyes wide open unsure whether to laugh at the joke or... did he miss the cue? Sailgood’s facial expression was collected and serious. The flight over Belarus was calm and most passengers were busy reading from tablets and listening to music.

‘You would have to ask the old lady for permission?’ said the American.

‘It’s called sense of humour, Tom,’ said Sailgood who never missed the opportunity to make a casual reference to the British Royal family in his conversations with the American. ‘Dry perhaps but nonetheless, humour.’

‘Fuck you,’ said Deutsch. He exhaled and pressed the service button. The stewardess came over in a matter of seconds.

‘A large Bourbon on the rocks,’ said Deutsch and signalled with his thumb at his co-passenger.

‘Thank you, Tom,’ said Sailgood. ‘A Scotch for me, please. Neat, thanks.’

While the stewardess was preparing the drinks, Sailgood and Deutsch sat in silence, each with his own line of thoughts and strategy to develop.

‘We are flying over Minsk, Belarus, at an altitude of thirty thousand feet,’ announced the pilot, ‘we’ll soon enter the airspace of Poland and then fly over Germany, Holland and across the English Channel. We expect to arrive at our destination soon after ten o’clock. The weather in London is calm, six degrees Celsius with no precipitation.’

The stewardess brought the drinks in large glasses and red BA napkins. They thanked her, scanned her delicate features, nodded in approval and raised the glasses.

‘To our enterprise,’ said Sailgood.

‘To Khatanga,’ said Deutsch. He then took a sip from his glass and asked: ‘Did your crew report today?’

‘From Khatanga, you mean?’

‘Yes, I meant from Siberia, Khatanga of course,’ said Deutsch. ‘They flew there on a reconnaissance mission and to meet the local politicians, right?’

‘Yes,’ said Sailgood, ‘but they had an accident.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The helicopter crashed...’

‘What, they are dead?’

‘No, not all of them,’ said Sailgood. ‘The pilot survived.’

‘Only the pilot survives the crash of a chopper?’ said Deutsch. ‘There’s a first time for everything, I guess.’

‘Yes, the Russian pilot survived. The helicopter belonged to the Russian Ministry of Forestry.’

‘Did the chopper crash or not?’ Deutsch showed signs of impatience.

‘It did crash but in such a manner that everyone got finely chopped by the rotors while the pilot managed to escape.’

‘I see,’ said the American. ‘I imagine that this official version of the events was provided by the most forthcoming Russian Ministry of Interior Affairs?’

‘Vadim Kudrov in person.’

‘Right,’ said Deutsch. ‘And how is our friend Aleksey Kaganov doing in London? Getting ready for his triumphant return to mother Russia?’

‘No, he seems to be dead,’ said Sailgood and helped himself to the Scotch.

‘Dead, you say?’

‘Car accident in Scotland.’

‘Jack, are you now telling me that our man, the governor of the fuckin’ biggest and now also richest chunk of Siberia managed to get himself killed in a car crash? Just like that?’

‘Confirmed by the police.’

‘What police force would that be? Not Russian, I hope!’

‘Scotland Yard,’ said Sailgood in a reassuring tone.

‘Why does this guy get killed in a car crash a couple of days after the Khatanga diamond mine announcement? This sounds wrong, Jack, plain wrong.’

‘Do you remember the Williams case?’

‘Not sure I do.’

‘It was an MI5 and FBI venture to develop a procedure and the necessary technical expertise and equipment for the analysis of the origin of banknotes. Our man, Williams, underwent training in London before being sent to Boston to pick your brains. Upon his return, he set up and ran a lab designed to process international deposit banknotes. It was all set and ready to go.’

‘I’m all ears,’ said Deutsch.

‘Well,’ said Sailgood and lowered his voice, ‘the day before the operation was meant to begin, Williams vanished and was found two days later in the bath tub of his bachelor flat in Pimlico stuffed in a sports bag. Dead, of course.’

‘I know that the guy vanished but didn’t know the details.’

‘Top secret. Not even his family was told.’

‘Why are you telling me all of this? What’s the connection?’

‘There is a most interesting coincidence. The first batch of banknotes earmarked for analysis belonged to our man, Aleksey Kaganov. We suspected him of many dodgy dealings

but wanted to have something concrete to tighten the screws on him before he was catapulted into the Kremlin orbit.'

'He didn't like it. I suppose.'

'The money originated from a Khatanga Investment Fund in Abu Dhabi and was transferred to London via Cyprus,' said Sailgood.

'Did he sell the Khatanga mining rights?' said Deutsch and shuffled in his seat.

'No. It's more likely to be Afghan drug money,' Sailgood reassured him.

'US dollars from the streets of New York, I bet,' said Deutsch and shook the ice cubes in his otherwise empty glass.

'Probably. That's something we expected Williams and his team to ascertain.'

'You think Kaganov commissioned the hit?'

'I'd say yes. However, the problem grows bigger,' said Sailgood. 'How did the information leak out!?'

'I see your point.'

'What's there to stop the next leak?' said Sailgood.

'In terms of our Khatanga operation, that leaves us to deal with Kaganov's number two, right?' said Deutsch and signalled for two more whiskies.

'Well, Zakhar Vatayev was assassinated the other day in Rome,' said Sailgood and his partner just stared at the melting ice cubes. 'It was a professional job. His own security man shot him. The killer then got shot himself.'

'Who got him, the police?'

'No, it was someone who managed to vanish. The Italian police couldn't identify him or trace him.'

'You think it's a Russian underworld affair?'

'Probably, although...' said Sailgood taking another drink from the stewardess. Once the girl turned around and marched down the aisle under the watchful eye of the two agents, he continued: 'Rumour had it that Vatayev was getting close to the Kremlin, too close.'

'Behind Kaganov's back?' said Deutsch, gently shaking his glass.

'So, we are led to believe.'

'And why are we now flying to London when everybody there seems to be dead?'

‘Kaganov’s wife, Milla Ivanovna, is au courant with the Khatanga enterprise and willing to continue the negotiations. She is the beneficiary of the will.’

‘I am glad that she is au courant,’ said Deutsch with an ironic expression in the corner of his lips.

‘The Mexican, Saldero, will be there too so we can conclude the deal to everyone’s satisfaction.’

‘The jewel?’

‘Thanks to your man in El Paso, the Mexican took charge of the jewel.’

‘The Banker?’

‘Lord Mintbatten, the President of the Rothson, Mintbatten & CEN will be there to meet us and attend to our financial needs,’ assured the Englishman. ‘He’ll see to transferring and investing the Mexican’s cash through the proper channels...’

‘Good. Mr Hank says the situation is under control,’ confirmed Deutsch before proceeding. ‘OK, the situation is not great but seems workable. But do you know what is the one thing that I hate more than anything else?’

‘What would that be?’ said Sailgood, raising an eyebrow.

‘Doing business with women,’ said Deutsch shaking his glass and listening to the comforting sound of crashing ice cubes. ‘Doing business with women.’

X

It was ten a.m. when a twin-engine Bombardier jet en route from Mexico City dropped through the clouds and touched down at London City airport. The aircraft turned left off the runway and came to a stop in front of the VIP entrance of the main building. The ground staff rushed to produce the passenger boarding stairs and the flight attendant opened the door. Through the opening emerged a ten-gallon white Stetson hat and the face of Gonzalo Pachenga. He clenched a hefty cigar between his teeth while scanning the surrounding area through a pair of gold-rimmed Ray Ban aviator glasses. He nodded his head and rushed down the stairs. El Guapo Medina was the next passenger to appear. He wore sunglasses too, a white suit, a claret red shirt with large lapels and on his feet, brown moccasins with an elaborate golden brooch. He looked around too, sniffed the air and his face turned into a grimace of disgust. From the top of the stairs, he spat on the tarmac and mumbled a couple of profanities. He took his sunglasses off, stuffed them into a pocket and came down the stairs. A woman followed him. In her early thirties, her hair was long and black. She had dark red lipstick, wore a fur coat and high heel boots that made it nearly impossible for her to walk. She managed to scream simultaneously at El Guapo in front of her and at Xavier Ituribe behind her. This was María Guadalupe Quetzalcoatl, Medina's third wife, a strong-headed woman whose whims and tantrums instilled more fear and panic among the cartel's members than Nieto Pachenga's machine gun and the machete combined.

'She used to be a nice farm girl,' El Guapo explained once, 'and then started to watch those idiotic soap operas and turned into one of her heroines. People who make those films should be shot. Right, as soon as I have some spare time, I'll have a couple of them shot, to make an example.'

After Guadalupe came Ituribe and a suite of security staff, a chef, a masseur, a coiffeur and an allegedly famous yogi who went by the name of Vayatta.

The party walked through customs and out onto the street. El Guapo, Guadalupe, Ituribe and Pachenga entered the first and longest limo that featured a multitude of aerials on the roof.

‘*Vámonos,*’ yelled Medina at the driver with a broad hand gesture and leaned back in the seat.

Ituribe pressed the interphone button without looking at the boss. ‘The Dorchester, on Park Lane, please,’ he said and the turbaned Sikh driver nodded and pressed the accelerator.

‘Finally get some use from your stupid Harvard and all those degrees,’ said El Guapo before breaking into uncontrollable laughter, ‘ha, ha...’

As soon as she managed to fix her make up using a small mirror and portable cosmetics set, Guadalupe banged her foot down and declared that she always wanted to see the Queen’s house.

‘*Mí amor,*’ said El Guapo, ‘not now, we go to the hotel first and then...’

‘I came all the way...’ said Guadalupe while her eyes turned dangerously feline, ‘to see that house.’

‘*María...*’

‘Nooow!’ she screamed, promptly settling the matter. El Guapo gave a nod to Ituribe who pressed the button and passed the instructions to the driver.

The motorcade made up of four limos drove slowly through the heavy London traffic. Medina watched the city through the tinted glass while images of other big cities he had visited flashed before his eyes: Los Angeles, Mexico City, Bogotá, Kabul... He had visited New York City too but didn’t have very fond memories of the sojourn. It ended with a bloody shootout in the Bronx that involved the NYPD, the Puerto Rican mafia, as well as a bunch of disgruntled retired members of the local Black Spades gang. El Guapo managed to escape but his younger brother José, El Guerrerito, was fatally wounded and died two days later. No, El Guapo Medina was not fond of New York and preferred not to remember the Bronx. He feared that his thirst for revenge would get the better of him and compromise his business interests.

‘Oh, he’s so tall,’ said Guadalupe interrupting El Guapo’s train of thoughts. She was looking upwards trying to see Lord Nelson on top of the marble column in Trafalgar Square. ‘A real man.’

The vehicle then passed through the Admiralty Arch and continued down The Mall towards Buckingham Palace. Guadalupe was so impressed by St James’s Park and excited

about the prospect of finally seeing La casa de la Reina that she clapped her hands in joy and screamed a few times.

As the vehicle approached the Palace, Guadalupe shouted, looking through the windscreen. ‘Oh, the Queen is at home,’ she said.

‘*Qué?*’ said El Guapo.

‘You wouldn’t know, would you? You thick-headed peasant,’ asserted Guadalupe, ‘When the Queen is in residence... That’s what you say, the Queen is in residence and the British flag flies at high-mast.’

‘Interesting,’ commented Ituribe.

‘Sure, sure,’ agreed El Guapo, ‘just stop screaming.’

The car turned left in front of the Palace and the driver announced that they would have to go around it for there were some road works to the right, on Constitution Hill. ‘It’s not that big,’ said El Guapo, sizing up the Queen’s home, ‘nothing special.’

Despite the dense layers of make-up, María Guadalupe’s face turned visibly white. ‘A peon who crept out of a cave in the heart of the Sonora desert with a pack of snakes is going to...’ she raised a finger in front of El Guapo’s eyes, ‘lecture me on the merits of classical European architecture?!’

‘I could have a bigger and nicer one built tomorrow if I only wanted.’

‘You?’ she said lowering the finger. ‘Where would you have that built? In which one of the two stinky, dusty back lanes of your pitiful, godforsaken Sierra Madre village?’

‘Stop me or I’ll kill her,’ said El Guapo to Ituribe and Pachenga who didn’t look enthusiastic about getting involved in this specific dispute. Luckily for them, a mobile phone rang and they both started checking their pockets. ‘It’s me,’ said Ituribe, ‘my international number.’ He looked at the display and then at El Guapo asking for permission to reply. Once the permission was granted he pressed the button.

‘*Dígame,*’ said Ituribe, ‘Yes, the flight was fine... Yes, all fine... Thank you.’ He then switched off the phone microphone and turned towards El Guapo. ‘It’s the Russian secretary. They propose to meet tonight.’

‘Tonight?’

‘Yes, the wife of the late Kaganov is in charge and she wants to meet you before the official meeting tomorrow afternoon.’

‘Wife...?’

‘Milla Ivanovna is the name.’

‘OK,’ agreed El Guapo, ‘tell them we’ll be there.’

‘One more thing, Jefe,’ said Ituribe, ‘they want us to bring the jewel tonight.’

‘The Russian Soul, tonight?’

‘This Milla Ivanovna wants to see it.’

El Guapo reflected for a moment and a faint smile appeared in the corner of his lips.

‘Sure,’ he said, ‘sure.’

Ituribe switched the microphone back on, confirmed the details of the meeting and thanked the interlocutor. ‘That was Senka Golovkin, the secretary to the late Kaganov and now to Milla Ivanovna.’

‘Two top people die within a couple of days,’ said El Guapo. ‘Interesting people, these Russians. There might be many things we could learn from them... about all these wars, revolutions and weapons, you know?’

‘I am not going anywhere tonight,’ Guadalupe screeched with disdain, ‘I need to buy some jewellery first. I need to make myself presentable.’

‘Of course,’ he agreed. ‘Ituribe has already booked you at Diment and Van Goor’s, the finest jeweller in London. Right, Xavier?’

‘Yes, yes,’ confirmed the adviser in earnest.

‘Hem,’ said Guadalupe, looking at El Guapo. ‘I don’t like that smirk on your face.’

‘Don’t worry Lupe,’ but he was interrupted by the driver who explained that there was a detour. To avoid the congestion they had to take Hans Crescent where they came up against a crowd of protesters obstructing the traffic. It was no more than a couple of dozen people surrounded by another dozen policemen and all standing in front of a red brick building. From one of the building’s balconies flew a flag. The protesters carried placards, chanted slogans and beat drums. As the vehicle came to a stop, Medina got out of the car to see what the fuss was about. Pachenga and Ituribe got out too while Guadalupe declared it was way too cold.

El Guapo stood in his white suite next to the white limo attracting the attention of many protesters. His own attention, however, was directed towards one of the balconies of the red brick building where a tall, white haired man held a microphone and addressed the cheering crowd.

‘Who is the guy?’ El Guapo asked Ituribe. ‘Is this the famous park where people can say anything they want?’

‘No,’ said Ituribe, ‘I don’t think so. I think this is the Ecuadorian Embassy and that is Julian Assange.’

‘French,’ concluded El Guapo. ‘What’s he doing here, in the Embassy?’

‘He can’t get out as they would arrest him,’ said Ituribe, pointing a finger at the policemen. ‘He’s been in here a couple of years now.’

‘What did he do?’

‘He revealed some compromising documents that belong to the United States of America.’

‘Ha, ha,’ laughed El Guapo Medina wholeheartedly, ‘So he cannot say everything he wants, right?’ And then, ‘Who does he work for? For that Wiki crime syndicate thing?’

‘No-one, he doesn’t work for anyone,’ said Ituribe. ‘WikiLeaks is an independent organisation, or so they say.’

‘Independent? Ha, ha, that’s a good one... is this the guy that intercepts communications?’

‘No, that’s the government,’ explained Ituribe. ‘They have a surveillance project.’

‘So, why did this guy reveal secret documents?’

‘Idealist, believes that he is doing the right thing.’

‘Idealist? I am an idealist, too,’ said El Guapo. ‘I am the greatest idealist this world has ever seen. Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata and I. But I, José Saldero El Guapo, am a free man. I don’t live in a stupid embassy and don’t sing from a balcony like a canary, do I?’

‘Of course not, *Jefe*,’ said Ituribe and Pachenga nodded in approval. The hard man couldn’t stand crowds or people expressing opinions. He couldn’t stand opinions full stop.

‘Hello, whitey,’ yelled Medina while jumping up and down and waving his hands in the middle of the street. ‘You should come and work for me. I’ll pay you well to do the same job, no problem. And you can say anything you like, ha, ha...’

XI

Senka Golovkin switched his mobile phone off and put it back in his pocket.

‘Medina is coming,’ he said.

‘Is he bringing the jewel?’ asked Milla Ivanovna.

‘Yes, he agreed to bring it.’ Senka leaned back into a large leather seat. ‘We will send Sergey tonight to pick them up and bring them to Cambridge.’

Milla Ivanovna’s driver was fully focused on the traffic and on reading the relevant information from a laptop-size touch screen. The destination was Canary Wharf and Number One Canada Square building, one of the tallest skyscrapers in London and home to many a multinational company including at least half a dozen that belonged to Aleksey Kaganov’s global empire.

Milla Ivanovna was a child of ambitious middle-class parents determined to see their daughter perform at the Mariinsky and Bolshoi theatres. However, after graduation from the prestigious Vaganova ballet school, the girl met Aleksey Kaganov. The attraction was immediate and mutual and she decided to move with Aleksey to London. When a couple of years later Milla announced that she was expecting a baby, the couple found a new home in Saffron Walden, a town between London and Cambridge. This mansion, Alden House, was not for sale so the Boss had to resort to his political channels to locate the owner. He informed the man that his wife liked the estate.

‘I am terribly sorry,’ said Lord Alden, ‘but the house is not for sale, you see. My late father left a provision in his will that...’

‘I am terribly sorry,’ interrupted the Boss, ‘I didn’t make myself sufficiently clear. My wife likes the house and money is no object. So, there are no problems. This is Senka Golovkin, my secretary. You tell him a figure and he will transfer the money into your account. It is very simple, really.’

‘But I...’.

‘I don’t need to know the figure,’ said the Boss, ‘actually, I don’t want to know the figure, you see. Money is no object, this is now my family home.’

So, Oleg was born in Alden House. A vivacious child, he liked horses, quad bikes and hunting.

‘A hunter by birth,’ Milla Ivanovna would explain, ‘like father like son.’

Now in her mid-thirties, her presence still commanded attention and respect. Her posture was firmly upright, her movements graceful and her Russian accent most often described as charming. Milla Ivanovna’s secret weapon though, was the penetrating gaze of her green eyes and the ability to scan with a minimal margin of error any man, woman or child who would find themselves crossing her path. As a Georgian businessman once put it, ‘her gaze has the same effect on men as the headlights of a car have on a rabbit standing in the middle of the road – admiration, terror and ultimately, destruction.’

Unlike the average BMW, though, Milla Ivanovna knew how to choose her rabbits.

She was now seated in the back of a car carefully scrutinising Semyon Fomich Golovkin with her thoughts running wild through an altogether different domain.

‘Senka,’ she said and switched the interphone communication with the driver off. She preferred to use nicknames when talking to her employees. ‘You are my closest aide, aren’t you?’

‘Yes...?’

‘Always been, right?’

‘Sure...’ said Golovkin and shuffled in his seat. He never enjoyed talking to Milla Ivanovna. He enjoyed it even less now that Kaganov was gone.

‘Senka,’ she said, ‘what do you really think of me?’

‘Milla Ivanovna, you know that I...’ said Senka raising his hands as if praying to the Almighty for help.

‘Of course, of course, Senka...’ she interjected.

Senka might have been a grandmaster in chess, a capable accountant and an astute adviser but he had little or no experience in urban warfare, terrorist tactics or hand-to-hand mortal combat, all arts that Milla Ivanovna was very fond of.

‘I know how devoted you have always been to Aleksey Kaganov and that you two went through a lot together.’ She didn’t say ‘before I had even met the Boss,’ but that is what Senka

correctly understood. He didn't say anything and Milla Ivanovna adjusted her scarf and wedding ring on her right hand before continuing: 'I know, I know that you always acted with the best interest of our family in mind and thank God for that, otherwise we wouldn't be sitting here and chatting, of course.'

Semyon Fomich grew up in Krasnoyarsk but upon his parents' premature death he was sent to stay with his father's relative in Voronezh. The relative was colonel Mikhail Borisovitch Gorsky, Alex Gorsky's father.

From a very young age, Senka excelled in the game of chess which earned him a scholarship for the Lomonosov University. He studied physics and upon graduation was offered employment in the Ministry of Finance where one day he met Aleksey Kaganov, a rising star of the vibrant Russian post-communist and proto-capitalist era of the early 90s. Kaganov spotted Senka's many talents and recruited him as his secretary. So, before one could say checkmate, Senka found himself in a country house, a dacha, surrounded by a couple of very young and gorgeous girls and near-industrial quantities of champagne, caviar and cocaine. As the Boss later explained to Senka, in their line of business, deals were sealed by a handshake. He also drew Senka's attention to the fact that he had just had sexual intercourse with two minors under the influence of drugs and that the prison sentence for such an offence was up to thirty-five years in jail. He didn't forget to stress, of course, that the whole evening was recorded by several cameras. Senka understood the subtle point the Boss was making and became Kaganov's man of trust. Reliable, assured, 'silent – as death,' was one of Boss's favourite expressions, 'ha, ha, ha...'

Senka Golovkin wasn't used to dealing with women and Milla Ivanovna had never shown any interest in Kaganov's business activities so that the two never exchanged more than two or three words... Senka Golovkin didn't understand women and he was afraid of things he didn't understand. He feared Milla Ivanovna like one fears the darkness, the earthquake, sickness or death.

'Milla Ivanovna,' said Senka Golovkin, 'if I may...'

'Yes, Senka,' she said and her face turned into a cold mask.

'I was wondering, now that Aleksey Dmitrovich is not with us...'

'Yes?'

‘Now that Aleksey Dmitrovich is not with us, would you know about a certain tape, a VHS tape that the Boss kept for me...’

‘What do you mean? The tape is yours?’

‘I mean, the tape is not mine but...’

‘But?’

‘I’m on the tape so...’

‘Ah, the tape,’ said Milla Ivanovna with a broad smile. ‘That tape.’

‘So, you know?’ said Senka who had still nurtured some outside hopes that she didn’t know about the tape.

‘The tape is in the safe in Aleksey’s study. Fear not Senka, fear not.’

‘Could I...’

‘No, Senka,’ said the woman in black, ‘that was between you and Aleksey as I understand and it is going to stay like that.’

Slightly confused by Milla Ivanovna’s line of thinking, Senka uttered, ‘sure, sure, I just thought that...’

‘I know Senka, I know. It’s all very sad, isn’t it? Anyway, let us talk about the future, shall we?’

‘Yes, of course, the future...’

‘What do we know about these people? This Lord, for instance?’ she said pronouncing the title with a curious mixture of importance and irony.

‘Lord Mintbatten is the president of the...’

‘No, no Senka,’ Milla Ivanovna interrupted. ‘I didn’t make myself clear. I am not interested in the official side of the story. Give me some real information about real people, give me something tangible.’

‘Tangible?’

‘Yes, tangible, real people, like... Is the man on drugs, does he bet on horses, is he a womaniser, a paedophile? You know... That sort of stuff!’

Senka had already opened his briefcase and was rummaging through his papers.

‘So?’ she said.

‘His wife is the second daughter of Avram Rotsohn.’

‘Not gay then.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘What *did* you say?’

‘That was his first wife, she was a wealthy heiress...’

‘How many wives are we talking about?’

‘According to my papers – five.’

‘Not young then, and lucky to be alive... After five wives, I mean,’ said Milla Ivanovna with the flair of a connoisseur. ‘So, we have this English aristocratic playboy... and he is our main financial adviser?’

‘He is President of the Rothson, Mintbatten & CEN, a major international bank.’

‘How major?’

‘They operate with Libyan and Iraq oil assets, for instance, that major.’

‘I see.’

‘The RM & CEN will take care of the cash and make it available for investment.’

‘Are you telling me that the Mexican’s drug cash will flow into their accounts and come out clean and ready to be invested in our operation?’

‘Something like that,’ said Senka, ‘the drilling, the extraction, the security and government bribes will be taken care of.’

‘Fine, tell me more about Rothson, Mintbatten & CEN.’

‘The Boss, Aleksey Dmitrovich, made initial contact last summer through our partners in Geneva. This was when we first learnt that the Kremlin decided to go public with the Khatanga diamond crater.’

‘Why was that so important?’ she said to Senka’s great relief. He was glad to learn that the Boss didn’t confide everything to his wife.

‘Well, the public announcement was a clear signal that the Kremlin was ready to take over the exploitation of the diamond mine,’ said Senka. ‘That also meant that the local gubernator, Aleksey Dmitrovich in this case, was being cast aside. The plan probably being to pay him off with some peanuts or...’

‘Or?’

‘Or worse,’ said Senka. He then raised a hand to cover his mouth and coughed discreetly.

‘Worse as in?’

‘Death, Milla Ivanovna. The ultimate price is death,’ explained Senka. ‘The Boss died in a car accident, didn’t he? The police confirmed that there wasn’t anything sinister about it, right?’

‘No, no, of course not,’ Milla Ivanovna reassured him. ‘I identified the charred body by the ring, gold chain and diamond he wore all the time. There was a witness who saw the driver losing control and coming off the road.’

‘Of course,’ said Golovkin.

‘Where will the Kremlin find the money for the exploitation of the crater? As far as I understand only one or two international companies in the world have the equipment and personnel to do that and they are expensive.’

‘They don’t have the necessary funds. The Popigai crater in Khatanga is hundreds of kilometres wide and the diamonds sit deep. The investment needed to reach them is going to be massive before there is any revenue to speak of. It might take several years before the first diamonds are extracted.’

‘So, again, why did they announce its existence?’

‘It’s complex...’

‘Don’t give me that complex thing, Senka,’ Milla Ivanovna cut him short.

‘Right, the Boss is... sorry, was tipped by the Western powers to run for the Presidential office next year. From the point of view of the Kremlin, taking away his resources is a good move. Hence, they present these resources as a public, national treasure and seize them. Furthermore, by going public they are opening the bidding process. They need investors. And, perhaps most importantly, a great strategic move.’

‘Why strategic?’

‘Because they are telling the world two things: firstly we can flood the world with precious stones any time we want. The market turns unstable and is in their hands. Secondly, and this is the biggest catch, they can establish the diamond as the reserve currency. The US treasury does not have anything like the necessary gold to support its currency. A diamond Rouble would be a serious contender, especially when combined with a nuclear capability.’

‘A diamond Rouble?’

‘Yes. A Rouble supported by the Chinese Yuan and convertible in diamonds. No financial speculations, no derivatives or hedge-funds, no money printing and quantitative easing, just diamonds!’

Milla Ivanovna was now looking through the dark car window at the passers-by, shoppers who all seemed to be in a terrible hurry. They carried plastic bags and protected themselves from the rain with colourful umbrellas. After a while the car stopped in the middle of a traffic jam and stood stationary for a couple of minutes. She pressed the interphone, ‘what’s going on, Sergey?’

Sergey took off his safety belt and got out in the street to find out the cause of the congestion. He came back shortly afterwards.

‘Strange,’ he said, ‘there is a crowd of protesters ahead of us blocking the traffic. That fellow Assange is talking from the balcony while there is another man in the middle of the street gesticulating and yelling in Spanish. Next to him there is another man with an oversized cowboy hat and huge moustache. Funny people.’

‘This Mexican, what is he like?’ asked Milla Ivanovna who always imagined Mexico as a mythical destination populated by Aztec and Maya demigods.

‘An animal, they say,’ said Golovkin, ‘that’s what they say.’

‘An animal?’

‘Yes,’ said Senka. ‘Do we still need the jewel now, now that the Boss is gone?’

Milla Ivanovna switched the interphone off and turned to him with an expression of amazement.

‘Yes, my dear Senka, we must have the Russian Soul.’ She said. ‘And we better get it, right? I hold you personally responsible for the fate of that jewel. You understand?’

‘I do,’ said Senka Golovkin with a nod. His chess-player’s mind was racing in several directions at once. ‘There is always a solution’ was his motto and all he needed to do now was to find it.

XII

In less than five minutes Niusha and Gorsky found themselves in front of house number 17 in the quiet surroundings of Willis Road. The row of houses was built in Edwardian style and each two-storey dwelling featured a pastel-coloured front door and a bay window on the ground floor, another bay window on the first floor and a couple of smaller windows just below the roof. Niusha opened the tiny iron gate and entered the small fenced concrete area that hosted a bunch of old, rusty bicycles chained together. She then took a set of keys out of her pocket and opened the door.

‘It’s me,’ she shouted.

Gorsky came in and was shown to a living room. It featured a couple of ancient leather armchairs, a large couch, a tea table and a flat screen TV set. The walls were dark green and the floor covered by a worn out dark grey fitted carpet. As the guest sat in one of the armchairs he noticed two framed pictures.

‘It smells like rental property,’ he thought. Having been through a fair number of those himself he knew how to tell a good from a bad landlord and a well-maintained flat from a run-down one.

‘Take your coat off, make yourself at home,’ said Niusha.

‘I’ll keep the coat on, thanks,’ said Gorsky.

‘Back in a minute,’ she said and vanished through the door and into the corridor that led to the kitchen. Passing by the bottom of the stairs she yelled something upstairs and a man’s voice replied.

‘Come down,’ she said so that Gorsky could hear her too. ‘I want you to meet a good friend of mine. He just saved my life.’

She then turned towards Gorsky and said in a low, barely audible voice: ‘Don’t mention my business or I’ll have to kill you.’

Gorsky nodded and the two exchanged glances.

‘Saved your life? Did you just say he saved your life?’ said a young man coming down the stairs. He was in his early thirties, not very tall and had short dark hair and dark eyes much like Niusha’s.

‘Aptin, Niusha’s brother,’ he said extending his right hand for a handshake. Gorsky got up from his seat and shook hands. He couldn’t help noticing that Aptin’s hand was no bigger than that of a child.

‘Not the hand of a brick layer or a soldier,’ thought Gorsky, ‘more that of an artist.’

‘I took the dog to the playground around the corner,’ explained Niusha, ‘and a gang of local hoodlums started pushing me around.’

‘The usual bunch that hangs around there?’ said Aptin with a worried expression on his face.

‘Yeah, it was the usual bunch. Give or take. There was one new face but the routine was normal: insults, racial slurs, threats, you know...’ said Niusha. She explained how this stranger, Gorsky was his name, came to rescue her from the claws of five or perhaps six hoodlums who then attacked him with broken bottles, knives and baseball bats but how the stranger repelled all the attackers and made them flee. For his trouble, Gorsky, she told him, was hit in the head with the bat that left him with a very bad cut and a bruise that she managed to treat. There was no need to see a doctor but a period of rest was required.

‘Right,’ said Aptin interrupting Niusha and turning towards Gorsky, ‘thank you for protecting my sister. Thank you so much.’

‘That’s fine,’ said Gorsky, ‘It wasn’t as dramatic as Niusha would like you to believe.’

‘It was, it was dramatic. He got bumped in the head too,’ she said and pointed at his head.

As soon as Aptin took a seat on the couch and started chatting to the guest, the doorbell rang. ‘I am waiting for some friends.’ He excused himself and went to open the door. Gorsky heard a clamour at the door and two newcomers appeared in the living room. The girl was short and chubby, had short, dark red hair, a nose ring and a couple of hoops in her ear lobe. The man was skinny and probably two metres tall, with long blond hair, a shirt with flowery motifs and an ancient, bleached denim jacket.

‘These are Aptin’s colleagues,’ said Niusha who had rushed in from the kitchen to do the introductions. She then told an even more enhanced version of that morning’s events adding

a mild concussion suffered by her saviour. The attackers were six, possibly seven. The newcomers clapped their hands in awe, hugged Niusha and expressed their gratitude to Gorsky.

‘This is Terry,’ said Niusha eventually, pointing at the girl, ‘and this is Jan.’ They shook hands and sat down, Terry and Jan on the couch and Aptin on the other armchair.

‘You’re not from around here.’ asked Terry.

‘I live here but I am Russian,’ said Gorsky.

‘I thought so. Russian, huh? Cool, that’s, kind of, very much not from here. I’m from not here myself, from the States,’ she said. ‘TK, everyone calls me that.’

‘What does the K stand for?’ said Gorsky.

‘I don’t remember,’ said Terry and giggled. ‘A kind of joke it was, really. Names are just arbitrary, a joke anyway.’

‘And I am just another bloody foreigner,’ said Jan with a broad smile, ‘Austrian, in temporary employment of the Crown.’

Niusha brought in teas and coffees and they continued with the introductions. Gorsky listened carefully. These people were not the usual mafia-style associates, soldiers or martial artists. There was something disjointed about them, different.

TK told Gorsky how she ran away from her parents’ Mid-Western home and went to California. A girl who knew she wasn’t quite a girl. She had to find out. Once she did find out, she left for New York. Life was good in Brooklyn. She had friends, a studio. There was a handful of galleries that would commission her work. At some point, she made a short film about a famous Chinese artist and made some money. It was all fine until a couple of years ago.

‘I was on my way back from a rubbish dump. I picked up a couple of car tyres that I needed for an installation. A TV crew stopped me and asked about the murder of a Puerto Rican girl whose body was found near the dump. I said I didn’t know anything about it. As I didn’t. But the interview was aired and I was referred to as a witness. They had to fill some TV time, you see?’

As it happens, the girl was a Puerto Rican prostitute killed by some Russian psycho associated with their mafia. So, suddenly I was wanted by the NYPD to provide information, by the Russians to keep me quiet, and by the Puerto Ricans for I witnessed the murder.’

TK left in a hurry. She boarded a plane to Brazil and hid there for a couple of months before coming to London. She worked in a pub now, pulling pints of beer.

‘I never had a drop of the stuff in my life,’ she said.

‘My life is not that dramatic,’ said Jan. ‘I came here to study and now sell LPs, vinyl, you know? Work in a shop.’

‘Jan is very important to our cause,’ said Aptin, ‘he is our ears and eyes. He eavesdrops on police communication in the area and is writing a book about the abuse of the rights of minorities.’

‘Yes, all kind of minorities, disenfranchised people in general. Could be gay or black, Eastern European or Pakistani... you know.’

‘And you, Aptin.’ Gorsky turned to the host. ‘What do you do?’

‘I am a chemist, a researcher at the University, carbon allotropes,’ said Aptin. ‘Not that it means anything to most people.’

‘Sounds interesting, anyway,’ said Gorsky who didn’t have the faintest idea what these allotropes might be.

‘Aptin is very humble,’ jumped in Niusha, ‘and the allotropes are his hobby now. He is a senior lecturer and his group carries out important, EU-funded research on diamond carbonate structures in Nano technological applications. Did I get this right, Aptin?’

‘Spot on, you’re getting good at it,’ said Aptin.

‘And me, yes,’ said Niusha, ‘I work at the homeless people hospice around the corner.’

‘And you, Alex Gorsky?’ said TK. ‘How about you? What’s your sin in this town?’

‘I am a gymnastics teacher,’ said Gorsky with a straight face. ‘I work at the Chesterton gym part time and part time as a security guard for a wealthy Russian family. They have a house near Saffron Walden and the son attends school here in Cambridge so I often take him to school and back, stuff like that.’

‘You were in the army or something?’ asked TK.

Gorsky hesitated with the reply. He looked at the faces around him.

‘Yes,’ he said eventually making his mind up, ‘I was in military service for a number for years.’

‘Been in a war?’ asked Jan enthusiastically, ‘Afghanistan, Chechnya, you know, one of those places?’

‘Yes, Chechnya,’ said Gorsky. ‘I’ve been in Chechnya.’

At that point the doorbell rang again. Aptin excused himself and went to answer it.

‘We are meeting this morning,’ said TK, ‘I don’t know if Niusha or Aptin mentioned our charming activities to you.’

‘No, we didn’t,’ said Niusha at which point Aptin came back in with the new arrival. ‘This is Steve,’ he said, ‘Steve the Drummer.’

‘Nice to meet you... Drummer,’ said Gorsky and nodded his head. He was beginning to like this motley crew of oddballs.

‘Steve is a musician,’ said Aptin.

‘You bet I am,’ said Steve showing a toothless grin. He had long, greasy hair, unkempt beard and traces of rough life on the streets all over his outfit. He could have been in his late thirties or early fifties and no one knew his exact or even approximate age.

‘We are part of an anti-imperialist movement,’ TK said to Gorsky while the others starting chatting about a different matter. ‘There are different factions like the Greens, the Anti-Globalists, and the Anti-Capitalists, but on one thing we all agree, we oppose the international financial institutions and their close ties with politics and the arms industry and trade, war, drugs, slavery...’

‘Marx was right,’ said Jan.

‘Sure, mate, sure,’ added Steve, ‘good old Karl was spot on.’

‘Gorsky, sorry to bother you with this stuff. I think it is better if we proceed with our business. Let’s go upstairs,’ said Aptin and everyone stood up ready to move. Everyone except Steve the Drummer who planted himself in the armchair and crossed his arms with a disdainful expression on his face.

‘Steve,’ said Aptin, ‘will you, please, stop acting for once and just behave like everyone else does?’

‘I’m coming, I’m coming,’ said Steve. ‘You kick off the meet and I’ll be on my way.’

‘Let me tell you, my friend,’ said Jan to Gorsky as Aptin vanished up the stairs. ‘They might be laughing at the mention of Marx,’ he said and pointed his finger towards the upper floor. ‘But countries as we know them today are but a relic of a Romantic idea and an invention of the colonial European past. Flags, national anthems, football teams, borders, languages... All rubbish, smoke screens to hide the totalitarian, oppressive, undemocratic nature of the

system and the rapacious nature of a ruling class that protects itself with the police and army where we are just the cannon fodder or, at best, a screw in their big engine. Did you see the Matrix?’

‘The Matrix?’ said Gorsky, not without surprise.

‘The movie.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ he said, ‘I tried three times. but failed and fell asleep each time.’

‘You fell asleep watching the Matrix?’ said Jan. ‘Woow! Shame. Anyway, I’ll tell you, we are all prisoners of the matrix. Life is not life, reality is not reality. It’s all fake of the fake, mirror images, not people, binary functions only, tax codes, shares... you understand?’

‘Yes,’ said Gorsky but was saved by Aptin’s appearance.

‘He’s always like that. Sorry,’ the host said before calling on everyone. ‘Let’s go, plenty of stuff to go through.’

‘Sure,’ said Jan and once he reached the doorway he turned and pointed a finger at Gorsky. ‘The matrix, remember. Anarchy is the solution to global oppression. Anarchy as disorder, lawlessness, a state of freedom of the individual to express themselves in a creative way, to... we’re all in the matrix!’

‘Of course.’ said Gorsky, nodding unconvincingly. ‘We’re all in the matrix.’

‘Jan,’ Aptin’s voice was heard from the upper floor.

‘Right,’ said Jan, ‘we are against corporate greed, corporate globalisation and the plundering of natural resources.’

‘Jan,’ came a shout from upstairs.

‘OK, fine, I am coming...’ said Jan, ‘See you next time.’

‘Good bye,’ said Gorsky trying to produce a smile.

There was a knock on the front door, then another one. ‘This must be Nick,’ said Niusha and went to let the newest comer in.

She came back followed by a man with short brown hair and black rimmed glasses. He wore a dark green jacket, white trousers and was probably in his mid-thirties.

‘Let me introduce you to my friend, Gorsky,’ said Niusha. ‘This is Nick...’

‘Nice to meet you,’ said Gorsky getting up from the armchair.

‘He’s Russian,’ added Niusha trying to be helpful as Nick extended his hand.

‘What do you make of your president?’ said Nick. ‘Myshkin?’

‘Nothing,’ said Gorsky and sat back in the chair.

‘I was hoping not to see you today,’ added Steve from the comfort of his armchair.

‘Alex saved me this morning from a group of maniacs... in the park next to the church, you know?’ said Niusha.

‘It would have been too good,’ said Steve, ‘too good.’

‘Thanks for saving our brightest star,’ said Nick while trying not to pay attention to Steve’s interjections and gesticulations. ‘What do you do here in Cambridge?’

‘A driver,’ said Gorsky.

‘As in taxi driver?’ said Nick with a grin.

‘No, I work for a Russian family, drive kids around,’ said Gorsky who somehow didn’t feel like expanding his account to his martial arts activities. Because he was already tired of explaining things or because... He didn’t know why himself. ‘I’m a driver,’ he concluded.

‘You could join us,’ Nick offered before turning to the others. ‘Niusha, have you recruited your friend for our cause?’

‘No, not yet. It’s still too early for that. Let’s give him a couple of days of freedom.’

‘But we need people for our protests in London. That’s in two days!’ said Nick.

As Gorsky opened his mouth to say something, Niusha interrupted him: ‘I’ll tell you about it later.’

‘You dickhead. You couldn’t organise a piss up in a brewery.’ Said Steve in a voice that was turning raucous and menacing.

‘Go away, you moron.’ Said Nick waving his hand as if defending himself from a swarm of flies. ‘And shut up!’

‘Don’t you dare give me that kind of shit, pretty boy,’ said Steve closing his hands into fists. ‘Save the attitude for your posh London mates. You don’t tell me what to do!’

But Niusha intervened and asked both men to proceed to the upper floor, where the meeting was about to begin.

‘They *can*’t start without me,’ said Nick. ‘I’m the chair.’

‘We can start without you,’ said Steve, ‘... and we can also finish without you. Without you is actually a good idea.’

As the two walked up the stairs still quarrelling, Gorsky stood up from his chair getting ready to go when, through the open kitchen door, he noticed a poster featuring a large bird with

golden wings spread wide and a sun-like circle in the middle. Riding on top of the bird was a bearded dignitary of some sort.

‘What’s that?’ he asked entering the kitchen.

‘A Fravashi,’ said Niusha passing him a mug, ‘and this is your tea.’

‘Thanks. What’s a Fravashi?’

‘The Fravashi is God’s messenger, an almighty being and a spirit protector that helps us in the fight between good and evil, between spirituality and materialism. It’s part of Zoroastrianism, an ancient, traditionally Persian religion and philosophy. It still exists in Iran and has followers around the world, even here, in this country.’

‘You’re Iranian?’

‘Yes and no,’ said Niusha. ‘Our father left Iran in the late seventies. Aptin and I were born here, we’re British. I visited family back in Iran only once, though Aptin has been there several times. We both speak the language. Our parents taught us. It was considered disrespectful to address an elder in English.’

‘A Fravashi,’ said Gorsky scrutinising the poster.

‘We are Muslims though,’ said Niusha. ‘Not really that devout and practising but still, of Muslim religion. We respect both our traditions though, the Zoroastrian and the Muslim one. They can coexist in one and the same person if the mind and spirit are at peace.’

Gorsky drank his tea and placed his mug next to the kitchen sink. ‘I have to go now, thanks.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, ‘I’ll get you your friend... What was his name?’

‘Knyaz. It’s Russian for Duke or Prince, something like that.’

‘Knyaz, nice name,’ she said, opened the kitchen door and waved for the dog to come.

‘Do they always talk to each other like that?’ Gorsky asked.

‘Who do you mean?’

‘The two of them,’ said Gorsky pointing a finger to the upper floor.

‘Oh, yes,’ she said, ‘Steve doesn’t like Nick for some reason and won’t let go. Nick is the coordinator of the protests. He was sent from London to organise the cell’s activities in line with the other cells around the country and the group meets here. Steve just can’t get his head around the fact that someone from the outside, as he sees it, is in charge. Apart from that it seems to be personal too. He just can’t stomach the man.’

XIII

It was a calm and starry. No wind, clouds or moon. Milla Ivanovna looked out of the drawing room window. She was expecting guests.

‘A good night for a good crime,’ she murmured and a little smile appeared in the corner of her lips. Since her teenage days, Milla Ivanovna had been an avid reader of Agatha Christie. She developed a strong preference for the flamboyant appearance and the stern logic of the Belgian sleuth Poirot rather than for the mild mannered, unassuming Miss Marple. Milla Ivanovna was fond of secrets, riddles and mysteries too. She read horoscopes regularly, consulted fortune-tellers and palm-readers, attended spiritual sessions and on, one occasion, was spoken to by the ghost of Rasputin, the legendary *yurodivy* mystic who told her that she should live in a proper royal court. ‘Life is a secret, isn’t it,’ she liked to add in conversations, like one adds salt to a meal, ‘Vsya zhizn’... yest’ divnaya tayna.’

Lord Mintbatten was to be the first of two visitors that evening. It was important to meet people informally before the official, procedural meeting on Friday.

‘Talk to them beforehand,’ the Boss used to say. ‘Get a feel for these people. They have weak spots, they have buttons you need to learn how to press.’

She had a head start and was going to make the most of it. The Lord would come earlier in the evening to introduce himself and outline his vision of their future business association. He would then be joined by the Mexican who was supposed to bring the jewel. She wanted to see it, touch it and hold it. She wanted to feel this majestic firebird, this mythical precious ornament that transcended history.

Then, there was the Moscow connection. Sailgood and Deutsch pledged full support for Aleksey Kaganov’s presidential campaign.

‘Valuable partners, very valuable indeed,’ is how Kaganov used to describe them.

The scene was set and the show was about to begin. Milla Ivanovna decided to wear a long black dress despite a pronounced aversion for dark colours. They made her look a touch

too pale. She was in mourning though, wasn't she? It was out of the question not to wear black. She couldn't resist adding a discreet white gold and red ruby necklace and a brooch in the form of an orchid - a very nice touch, for connoisseurs only.

'Let's see if this Lord has any finesse or it's only title,' she thought as she noticed the lights of a car entering through the main gate.

'Mintbatten,' she said and turned to face Senka Golovkin who was seated on a sofa and going through the contents of a large black folder. 'Let's see what these lords are made of. Go and get him, Senka.'

Golovkin closed the folder and put it on the table in front of the couch. He didn't like Milla Ivanovna's tone. But then again, he never liked the woman in the first place. He stood up, straightened his dark blue tie and walked out of the library and into the corridor towards the entrance. As he left the room, Milla Ivanovna turned to the wall-mounted mirror to make sure that her black dress followed the curves of her body and that the jewellery she was wearing matched the colour of her eye shadow and lipstick. The orchid was reassuring, she thought as she adjusted the brooch, for a poor, recently widowed woman facing a pack of rampant, roaring lions.

'Lord Mintbatten, Ma'm,' announced the maid standing in the doorway of the library. Milla Ivanovna turned around and nodded for the visitor to be let in.

A tall white-haired man in his seventies marched into the room followed by Golovkin. 'My dear Madame Kaganova,' he said placing his left hand on the side of his dark blue striped suit where the heart should be. 'Please, accept my deepest and sincerest condolences.'

Milla Ivanovna stood immobile and solemn. A caryatid of sorts.

'Thank you,' she said in a tone that stopped the visitor in his stride some six feet in front of her. 'Lyudmila Ivanovna, please. You may call me Milla Ivanovna.'

'Of course, of course,' said the visitor. 'Call me David, please. Pronounced the French way, Da-vid. My mother was French, you see, and I was given the name after my great-grandfather, a renowned architect who planned the reconstruction of the Palais de Justice in Paris. Otherwise, my full name is David Nathaniel Francis Mintbatten, Lord of Bloomsberry.'

'I see. Take a seat please,' said Milla Ivanovna and walked to the large sofa. Lord Mintbatten settled a little bit further on the couch opposite from the lady of the house.

'May I offer you tea or coffee?' said the hostess.

‘Tea, of course,’ said the visitor with a broad grin. Golovkin sat quietly in an armchair not very far from his black folder. He sat, observed and listened.

‘English tea or... Russian tea?’ she asked.

‘I shall try your Russian tea,’ said the lord.

Milla Ivanovna raised an eyebrow, summoned the housekeeper and gave instructions for the tea and cookies to be brought in.

‘It is a great tragedy, what happened to Mr Kaganov. When I heard the terrible news, I felt devastated as we spoke so many times over the phone...’

‘Twice,’ said Milla Ivanovna who didn’t fail to notice the slightly wrong pronunciation of her surname.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said the lord.

‘You spoke twice over the phone with Mr Kaganov.’

‘Right, yes of course, but we exchanged e-mails and documents and our project was coming together very nicely you see...’

‘I know, I know, dear Lord,’ said Milla Ivanovna lowering her gaze in a display of modesty and affection. ‘Mr Kaganov always kept me very well informed about business matters, almost as if he had expected something to happen to him.’

It didn’t take much in terms of time and resources for Milla Ivanovna to figure men out and put them in little multi-coloured boxes, all labelled and with clear instructions for dosage and general use. Longish white hair, pronounced Greek nose, tall but not too tall, slender, with an agile, light step, a man who took care of himself, probably into sports, fresh air, horse riding and the French Riviera. A man who obviously chose his own food, wine and company carefully, who always thought of himself as attractive, attended a posh public school, survived the 60s and 70s, adventurous, promiscuous, paedophile? Hem, not sure about that one... It would be a useful weakness though, very useful, thought Milla Ivanovna.

‘Tragic, that is all very tragic, indeed,’ said the Lord. ‘However, I am immensely grateful for this opportunity to meet outside the official business framework. It is always useful to acquaint oneself more intimately with business partners before we get bogged down in the dreary details of our operation.’

Milla Ivanovna smiled her best formal smile just as the maid entered the room carrying a silver samovar. She was followed by another maid with a large tray of cups, a bowl of sugar

and a saucer full of cookies. They placed the samovar on a small side table and the cups, bowl and cookies on the table in front of Milla Ivanovna and her guest. Lord Mintbatten found the spectacle fascinating. He smiled and clapped his hands.

‘What a charming ceremony,’ he exclaimed.

‘The samovar?’ inquired Milla Ivanovna.

‘Yes, you see,’ continued the Lord clapping his hands one more time, ‘after the Great War and the revolution in Russia, my family was in Geneva and my grandfather offered sanctuary to our Moscow cousins. These cousins, you see, they brought with them, among all the other things, a silver samovar quite like this one. They claimed they bought it in Yasnaya Polyana where it belonged to Leo Tolstoy, the great author.’

‘Lev Nikolayevich,’ said Milla Ivanovna.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy,’ she said, giving emphasis to the Russian pronunciation of the name.

‘Of course, quite... you see, and the tea from that samovar is different, much better than anything else I have ever tasted. Different,’ he said and chuckled. ‘Whenever I find myself in Geneva I go to our house to have a cup of tea.’

Milla Ivanovna began pouring the tea.

‘Do you take sugar or milk?’ she asked.

‘Nothing, thank you. I want to taste the real Russian tea,’ he said shaking his head and accepting the cup.

Senka took his cup from Milla Ivanovna’s hands and leaned back in his seat. He sipped his tea.

‘Beautiful porcelain,’ said the Lord raising the cup to his eyes and inspecting the flowery motif. ‘Russian, I trust.’

‘Of course, it is a Vorobyevsky pattern from the Lomonosov Imperial porcelain factory,’ she said looking at the guest through her eyelashes. ‘But tell me, Lord Mintbatten, please, you have met Aleksey Kaganov. What did you talk about, what kind of impression did he make on you?’

‘Oh, my dearest Milla Ivanovna,’ said the Lord. ‘Mr Kaganov was a most excellent man of impeccable integrity. A sincere patriot and generous benefactor, a humanist and a man of the world.’

This, for some reason, reminded the Lord of the time when he met the Dalai Lama at a garden tea party in Connecticut. It was in the home of a tycoon who later jumped out of the window of his Wall Street office. The Lord was, of course, most impressed by Mr Kaganov’s vibrant personality and the decisive, uncompromising stand he always took in business and politics. The man had an ardent desire to safeguard the interests of his motherland, Russia, and help the proud but sadly, oppressed people by agreeing for his name to be put forward in next year’s presidential election. He was to be the candidate of the pro-democracy Druzhba party.

While the Lord was searching for the most adequate adjectives to express the highest esteem he held Mr Kaganov in, Senka Golovkin sipped his tea absorbed in his thoughts and trying to connect the Boss with words such as acumen, benefactor, philanthropy... It all reminded him of at least a dozen Boss’s business partners and associates who met bitter ends in bizarre car accidents, exploding airplanes, in bath tubs connected to electricity or who were sent to prison on charges ranging from high treason, tax evasion, drugs and arms trafficking, to child pornography. Others were shot, like Vatayev and his wife. Yes, quite like that, thought Senka, just like the Vatayevs. He was too sentimental. It was as if he already missed the old days when the Boss was in charge and the world had a structured, recognisable shape. He switched off his reflective mode and returned to the room.

‘Well, for instance,’ the Lord was saying, ‘this mania for political correctness is leading us down the path of self-obliteration. Our very identity is at stake today. Foreign languages. Can you imagine the lack of intelligence behind the decision to teach languages to children in state schools? What do they need languages for? Working class kids will stay working class. You don’t need languages or university degrees to operate a tractor, to run a barbershop, drive a lorry or fill in a spread sheet, do you? Complete nonsense. Foreign languages are for children blessed with a privileged upbringing and educated in excellent boarding schools. They will go on to study at Oxford or Cambridge, grow in stature and lead this country to even greater heights.’

At this point, Senka observed that the Lord was already red in the face and gesticulating considerably more than before. He can’t even breathe properly, thought Senka and considered

the possibility of the visitor having a heart attack or a stroke. Unlike Lord Mintbatten though, Milla Ivanovna sat on the couch with her back upright and her chin raised with her hands in her lap. She smiled, nodded and even sighed from time to time.

‘Every society must respect order. Social order is a sure sign of achievement, the maturity of a civilisation and the more rigid, robust and firm the order, the more vital the society. Just look at the Greeks and Alexander the Great, Rome under Caesar, France under Napoleon, the British Empire at the time of Queen Victoria, the Americans today!’ said Lord Mintbatten and then paused gasping for breath. A pause that Senka Golovkin used to try to imagine Genghis Kahn wielding his sabre on horse-back, Hitler having tea on the peaceful terrace of the Berghof, and Koba Stalin visiting a Siberian gulag in mid-winter.

‘A society that fails to enforce a firm structure is doomed. Social upheaval leads to chaos in the streets or worse, as in the case of your own country,’ concluded the Lord, and Senka Golovkin thought he saw a shadow in Milla Ivanovna’s gaze.

But Lord Mintbatten wasn’t finished. Encouraged by his interlocutor’s silence he felt strongly supported to put on full display his deep understanding of world history and exemplary locution. He went on to assert that what happened in Russia in 1917 was inexcusable and terrifying. Those communist animals bit the whole country off in a single go. They chewed it up and spat it out. They killed the Tsar, his family, wife, children, servants, dogs, cats and horses! They pillaged, raped, destroyed, murdered... The least they could do was to let the noble sovereign, Nikolay II, and his family leave and find sanctuary in England. Indeed, King George was waiting to offer sanctuary to his Russian cousin. Those two men were so sensitive, so gifted. They even looked alike. Milla Ivanovna felt obliged to draw the Lord’s attention to the simple fact that, from her point of view, of course, George V was a miserable, cowardly, exemplar of low life that denied sanctuary to the Romanovs at the very moment when the Soviet government in Moscow was trying to get rid of them by dispatching them abroad. She returned one hand to her lap and took another deep breath looking the Lord straight in his, by now, somewhat worried, blue eyes. She continued by explaining how her father, the General Porphyry Mikhailovich Yepanchin used to say that English hypocrisy was as guilty of the Romanovs’ deaths as were the Communists. Treason and especially betrayal against one’s own family members, she concluded, must be the lowest point on any ethical scale.

‘*Mon Dieu*, but of course, *ma chère* Milla Ivanovná,’ said Lord Mintbatten and decided to change the topic. He expressed his utter delight that Mr Kaganov brought such valuable business to his bank. He was sure, of course, that they were best placed to safeguard such a complex portfolio of interests for their firm had two centuries of experience in protecting the investments of major imperial houses across the globe. They even managed to safeguard the interests of clients in times of world upheavals such as the Boer War in South Africa, the crisis in the Congo, the Great War, Chile during Pinochet, and Argentina during Perón, just to mention a few, then, of course, post-Soviet Russia in the 90s.

‘My Lord,’ interrupted Milla Ivanovna, ‘our adviser, Mr Golovkin here, has prepared all the relevant materials for you and is waiting to go through them in detail.’ At which point Senka Golovkin picked up the black folder from the table with both hands.

‘Naturellement, naturellement,’ said Mintbatten and turned towards Senka.

‘Mr Golovkin is the administrative and financial brain behind our operations and he will be able to answer all your questions and work out the details of our cooperation. What I wanted to say is that we are dealing here with a business proposition that was very important to the late Mr Kaganov. We own the biggest diamond mine in the world. It is situated at the bottom of a hundred kilometres wide Siberian meteor crater, as you probably know. It is in our interest to start the exploitation of this mine sooner rather than later. Our partners are Garriburton Global and Mr Medina of Mexico. We also have strong support in parts of the Russian government and business community. Mr Kaganov was the Democratic Front’s candidate for next year’s presidential elections and his nomination was hailed by the Western international community as an important step towards the advancement of democracy and civil rights in Russia as well as towards the country’s full inclusion in the global financial system. Your role is to give a legal structure to our little venture and to secure the flow of financial assets,’ said Milla Ivanovna who obviously did pay attention during her husband’s business meetings.

‘You will transfer the monies coming from Mexico through your channels, dissociate the funds from their origin and prepare them for further investment in the Khatanga operation.’

‘Of course, I...’ said the Lord.

‘I personally don’t want to have anything to do with local institutions,’ said Milla Ivanovna in a firm manner that didn’t allow objections. ‘This comprises the government,

banks, multinational companies or any other agent inclusive of the Queen and the Archbishop of Canterbury. That will be your job and you will be handsomely rewarded. *N'est-ce pas*, my dear Lord?’

‘*Oui, oui, certainement*, Madame. Britain is the ideal country for unimpeded investment, free of unnecessary regulations and burdensome scrutiny.’

‘That all sounds fine. But let us not be seduced by pretences. Mr Kaganov himself used to say that this country is a colony that sees itself as an empire. That’s all,’ said Milla Ivanovna before explaining that the foreigners obviously find such a case of institutionalised schizophrenia charming. Freud and Jung would do wonders here. You have the Queen, the Princes, Buckingham Palace and then... Coke, hot dogs and the American president on television every day. Charming. At which assertion the visitor drew Milla Ivanovna’s attention to the fact that Britain was widely recognised as a dynamic international business and financial hub that held a pivotal diplomatic and military role in global affairs.

‘Is that so?’ said the lady of the house and sipped her tea. Calm and composed, she sat upright with her neck extended and chin raised. After all, she did train to be a prima ballerina and to perform on the greatest stages.

‘Well, yes,’ said the visitor.

‘Britain used to be great,’ Milla Ivanovna said and raised the little finger of the hand that held the cup. ‘It is now just another American colony and Mr Golovkin explained that to me very nicely.’

Senka Golovkin squeezed his black folder just a little bit harder.

‘The only really great and important world powers are the Americans, Russia and China and there is nothing to debate about it. A colony, a colony,’ she said and stamped the floor with a foot. ‘And... This country of yours, Britain, missed the greatest opportunity to retain the status of empire.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ said the Lord who had given up the tea and returned the cup and saucer to the table. He was sitting like a school boy, with his hands firmly planted on his knees. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Nikolay II appealed for sanctuary to dear King George, didn’t he? But no, the dear English cousin knew better and followed the advice of his short-sighted, back-stabbing ministers.’

‘Ma chère Milla...’

‘My dear Da-vid,’ said Milla switching suddenly to the guest’s first name. ‘If only Queen Victoria were still alive. A woman, especially a woman of that stature would never have missed such an opportunity and the world would be a very different place today, wouldn’t it?’

‘If Queen Victoria were alive today?’

‘No, if she were alive back in 1917 and granted sanctuary to the Romanovs.’

By this stage of the conversation, Lord Mintbatten had given up any hope of agreeing about historical events with Milla Ivanovna and resigned himself to nodding and glancing, from time to time, at Golovkin in the hope of deciphering clues from his facial expressions. Unfortunately for the Lord, Senka Golovkin observed this spectacle the way he followed chess tournaments, like a Sphinx, in a rational and expressionless mode.

‘In which case, of course, at the demise of the Soviet Union, the heirs of the Romanovs would have returned to Russia as British citizens and strengthened the ties between the two countries,’ said Milla Ivanovna spreading her arms, ‘can’t you see that?’

‘But no,’ she continued, ‘You chose to remain just a small island, an irrelevant colony on the outskirts of Europe.’

‘But, Milla Ivanovna...’ protested the Lord, ‘Britain is an important factor...’

‘Is it?’ she interrupted him again, ‘An important factor in international relations... I presume. My dear David, had the people of this island known anything about their own interests, they would have carried out a proper revolution just like other civilised countries in Europe and the world did. Russia and France did, and even America!’

Pleased with such an articulated and forceful exposition of her obviously very strong political views, Milla Ivanovna picked the cup up from the table and sipped her tea. ‘It’s cold,’ she said, ‘what a shame.’

‘Well of course, Madame Milla Ivanovna,’ said Lord Mintbatten, ‘I do understand your very subtle point of view. The British, however, are steeped in tradition...’

‘The British? Aleksey used to say that there was no such thing as the British. You see, Da-vid, when you peel the first layer of the onion, you find that the Scots are Scots, the Irish are Irish and the Welsh are Welsh. Only the English keep on banging on about being British.’

‘I see,’ said the Lord who felt like he did on one occasion many years ago as an amateur boxer after having received a couple of blows too many to the head. Milla Ivanovna returned

the cup to the table and got up from her seat. The visitor and Golovkin followed suit. She excused herself as she had a pressing commitment. Something about the late Kaganov's estate and inheritance, she said, most boring formalities. Lord Mintbatten nodded and Milla Ivanovna walked out of the room. As she disappeared, Golovkin invited the visitor to take his seat again and they both sat on the couch and started to go through the pile of documents. Golovkin explained that Khatanganefit owned a considerable chunk of the northern Siberian territories that were rich in water, coal, oil, gas, diamonds and minerals of considerable strategic importance. While these resources are sought on the world market, their mining cost is considerable. Given the latest and precipitous developments in international politics, it was advisable to begin this process in earnest while Russia was still under international sanctions. Such a position allowed traders to lower the selling prices and to gain insight and access to well-guarded areas. The Kremlin needed hard cash.

'The finances were in place,' explained Senka Golovkin. 'Courtesy of the Mexican gentleman. The role of RM & CEN, dear Lord, is to ensure the smooth running of the monetary transactions — smooth, safe and discrete.'

'Discrete, of course,' said the Lord pointing his finger at the documents. 'May I?'

'Please do,' said Senka. 'As you can see, Khatanganefit owns the land and we have established sound business contacts with both a good investor and Garriburton, a subsidiary of Blackwater, a reputable mining and distribution company that is moving its business out of Zimbabwe and is happy to enter Russia. I must add at this point that our esteemed investor operates in cash only.'

'Cash?' said Mintbatten raising an eyebrow.

'US dollars.'

'What kind of money are we talking about?'

'Billions.'

'Billions?'

'Six billions.'

'Six billions in cash?'

'The first year, and to be increased by ten to fifteen percent every year.'

'Six billions a year... Over how many years?'

'Five is a good number, we thought.'

‘I see,’ said Mintbatten. ‘And the cash comes from?’

‘Mexico,’ said Golovkin. ‘We would like this money moved to London via the usual routes, Abu Dhabi and Hong Kong. Despite what Milla Ivanovna was saying, with due respect, we do trust the British financial system.’

‘Oh, my goodness, I can assure you that you are right about that,’ said Lord Mintbatten lowering his voice as if confiding in Senka Golovkin. ‘Milla Ivanovna, is she always so outspoken or is it because of this unfortunate accident?’

‘Because of the accident, you see,’ said Golovkin who, as a matter of principle, didn’t like telling lies but felt it his duty to salvage the deal. ‘It was a very hard blow for Milla Ivanovna and she is finding it difficult to deal with.’

‘I see. Terrible occurrence, utterly terrible,’ said the Lord.

‘We still have our connections in the Russian establishment,’ said Golovkin. ‘The new regime will be friendly, they say. They will need the money to survive the winter.’

‘Winter?’

‘Yes, it’s a Russian metaphor for... trouble, in general.’

‘I must tell you, Mr Golovkin, that given the risks involved in dealing with cash, our provision will have to be somewhat higher.’

‘We understand and appreciate that.’

‘The bills might be marked, you see.’

‘Sure,’ said Golovkin and stopped in mid-sentence as he heard a gentle knocking on the open door of the study. He raised his eyes and saw the maid standing in the doorway.

‘Mr Medina is here,’ she said and gestured towards the lobby.

XIV

‘Very well,’ said Golovkin to the maid, ‘give us a minute.’ He then collected his papers and put them back into a folder that he closed with an elastic band.

‘Our investor is here,’ he said standing up from the couch. Lord Mintbatten followed suit with an expression of marked curiosity.

The sound of heavy and quick steps approached the study and the stocky frame of El Guapo Medina appeared in the doorway. He stopped for a moment and scanned the two men standing in the middle of the room the way wild animals sniff the air of an unfamiliar patch. He then smiled and walked in, followed by abogado Ituribe and his obligatory sombre facial expression. Golovkin made two steps to meet him and the two men shook hands.

‘Senka Golovkin,’ said he, ‘secretary of the late Mr Kaganov and now at the service of Milla Ivanovna.’

‘Wonderful,’ exclaimed the Mexican shaking the hand with all his might. ‘And this one?’

‘This is Lord Mintbatten,’ said Golovkin who managed to extract his hand from the deadly grip.

‘Of the renowned ... I believe?’ said Medina and shook the Lord’s hand.

‘Indeed,’ said the financier trying to pull his hand back with a smile, ‘Mr Medina.’

‘El Guapo,’ said the Mexican. ‘Call me El Guapo. So, you are the financial genius that we owe our wellbeing to?’

‘Well, I come from a long line of bankers...’

‘Ha, ha, bankers,’ said Medina putting one hand on Golovkin’s shoulder. ‘I come from a long line of buccaneers and *peones*, you know? Zapata y Pancho Villa.’

‘Great Mexican revolutionaries,’ explained Golovkin.

‘Of course,’ agreed Lord Mintbatten who had already had his yearly dose of history lessons.

‘And where is that worldwide renowned beauty, the flower of the desert of London, ha, ha. You know, the most beautiful flowers grow in the desert of Sonora, among the hot rocks, snakes and rats. They grow despite having too much sun and not enough water, it’s a miracle. Beauty is a miracle. Where is that woman whose touch can thaw the glaciers of Siberia and ...’

‘And sign the documents we need, perhaps?’ said Mintbatten coldly. He detested petty playboys who could turn into a real nuisance and disrupt the ethereal art of seduction that he thought himself to be a master of.

While the introductions and exchange of pleasantries took place in the middle of the study, abogado Ituribe walked into the room completely undetected, and took a seat in one of the armchairs. He placed his leather briefcase on his knees and then managed to fall back and sink into the cushions.

In the middle of this somewhat awkward conversation, it dawned on the Lord that this son of buccaneers, *peones*, *zapatistas* etc. was at the same time arguably the richest man in the world and that the business prospects of this encounter out-weighed by several orders of magnitude the range of concerns his vanity was trying to impose on him. The Mexican wearing the obligatory moustache, red shirt and rattle snake boots had cash to burn and Lord Mintbatten could surely smell an opportunity from the distance of at least a hundred nautical miles.

‘Take a seat, please,’ said Golovkin. ‘Mrs Kaganov will be with us shortly. I will inform her of your presence.’

When Golovkin left the room, Medina sat in an armchair and Mintbatten back on the couch. ‘This is my consigliere,’ said Medina making a gesture towards Ituribe who was barely visible among the large cushions and who was in the act of taking a silver cigarette holder out of his pocket. Abogado nodded, lifted the lid of the holder and offered its content to Lord Mintbatten who was sitting on the couch.

‘No, thank you,’ declined the Lord politely. It crossed his mind that these Mexicans must have some real, good stuff but the formal nature of the occasion called for self-restraint.

‘Lord, you said?’ said El Guapo while scrutinizing the financier from the tip of his shoes to the parting in the white hair.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Mintbatten.

‘So, you inherited the title?’

‘Of course, I did.’

‘How many generations?’

‘Fifth,’ said the Lord with a touch of humility.

‘And... how did your ancestor get it?’ El Guapo was relentless.

‘For financial services to the Crown, you see. My ancestor, Adalbert Bethmann was a renowned banker and a philanthropist. Queen Victoria herself bestowed this peerage upon him.’

‘The Queen bestowed the peerage... upon him,’ repeated Medina tentatively. He was of course, more accustomed to the El Paso variety of Spanglish than Mintbatten’s polished English.

‘But he was German?’ asked El Guapo.

‘Yes, he was German but later in life he transferred his assets to England.’

‘Victoria is not alive anymore?’

‘No, she died more than a hundred years ago,’ explained Mintbatten.

‘And who’s the new one?’

‘Elizabeth II,’ said Mintbatten drily for he found it hard to accept that there were people on the planet who hadn’t heard of the Queen. Or, was the visitor to the United Kingdom just having fun?

Ituribe took the opportunity created by the sheer intensity of that conversation to swallow one of the pills from his cigarette holder. He was cool. He was relaxed. Working for *señor* Medina never came easy, true. On the other hand, the dull moments he cared to remember could be counted on the fingers of one hand. He was relaxed.

‘And who was the first?’ asked Medina.

‘Elizabeth the First, the daughter of Henry VIII.’

‘Lots of Henrys, I see,’ said the Mexican. ‘And how do I become a Lord?’

‘You?’

‘Yes,’ said El Guapo jumping from his seat and landing on the couch next to Mintbatten. ‘How do I become Lord Saldero? José Saldero Medina de la Sonora. How much money do they want for that?’

‘Well,’ said the lord who took a white handkerchief out of his pocket, placed it in front of his mouth and coughed twice - gently. ‘You need to make a significant contribution to the Crown and country. I can see what I can do, of course. I have some connections, you see...’

‘Crown and country? You’re joking? I don’t really care about those folks. Just tell me how much money, I pay and you then contribute as much as you like, *comprende?*’ he said and extended a hand to seal the said deal.

‘I am sure that something can be arranged.’

Fortunately for the beleaguered aristocrat, short, brisk steps were heard and Milla Ivanovna appeared in the doorway. She cast a prima donna—like glance over the stage and audience, commanding silence, attention and adulation. She then made her first well-choreographed step on the stage of global finance, politics and deception. The great ballerinas Anna Pavlovna and Tamara Karsavina walked hand in hand with Milla Ivanovna. The greatest ballerinas carried the skinny Sankt Petersburg girl several feet over the study room carpet and towards her faithful admirers. The dream never left her for good. It just got mixed up with other ingredients to form a most peculiar brew. El Guapo Medina stopped listening and Lord Mintbatten stopped talking. Abogado Ituribe, who was in a state of self-induced stupor, appeared incapable of detecting the siren approaching and stayed put, in mortal danger.

‘*Que preciosa,*’ said El Guapo and jumped from his seat. Lord Mintbatten emitted two tiny coughs and followed suit while Senka Golovkin entered the room undetected, the way he preferred to do things.

‘*Encantado señora Kara...*’ continued the Mexican while extending both his hands towards Milla Ivanovna in an obvious attempt to kiss her.

‘Kaganov,’ interjected Lord Mintbatten with the sweetest smile while at the same time asserting his newly acquired and hard-earned authority in all things Russian. ‘It is pronounced Kaganov.’

‘Yes, indeed. Kaganov...’ said Milla Ivanovna. ‘But you may call me Milla Ivanovna,’ she concluded offering her right hand to El Guapo for a kiss.

‘*Encantado, Milla Ivanovna,*’ said the Mexican, ‘José Saldero Medina, El Guapo for friends, of course.’

‘El Guapo?’ she said.

‘Yes, the Handsome,’ he said not without modesty. ‘It runs in the family, you see. My father’s line, of course.’

‘Take a seat, please,’ said Milla Ivanovna and she herself took a seat in one of the large armchairs.

‘And that is,’ said El Guapo while taking a seat himself on the sofa not very far from the lady of the house, ‘my trusted consigliere Ituribe.’

Ituribe, who had managed to get up on his feet, sat back again in his chair, produced something like a smile and nodded. Milla Ivanovna scanned the man and produced one of her little, barely visible smiles. She then sighed and expressed sorrow and desolation for the late Aleksey Kaganov wasn’t there in person to greet such fine gentlemen and discuss these most promising business propositions. However, she concluded, life must go on as the fate of her beloved country, Russia, and of the rest of the world, of course, depended on this very complex and ambitious political, business and financial proposition. She then explained how Mr Kaganov was the man with perfect qualities, credentials and contacts to hammer this deal home.

‘If he were still alive,’ she said with tears in her eyes, ‘the fate of Russia and her relationship with the international community would be in safe hands. Aleksey Dmitrovich has... had, that is, the level of political and practical sophistication required to win the Russian elections and replace that odious dictator, Myshkin.’ She sighed again and used a tiny embroidered handkerchief to wipe a small tear from the corner of her eye.

‘They did it,’ she continued. ‘I am sure they did it.’

‘The Russians?’ said Mintbatten.

‘He’s dead?’ said El Guapo. ‘*Muerto, matado?*’

The conversation was taking an interesting turn, thought Senka Golovkin. He had expected the Boss’s sudden disappearance to foment a range of theories including the Sicilian Mafia, a possible FSB organised execution or an MI6 sponsored assassination. The one single person he could not afford to underestimate was the grieving widow, Milla Ivanovna. She was the non-professional link in a chain of lies, ever changing alliances and shifting priorities.

‘Definitely,’ said Milla Ivanovna. ‘I am absolutely sure that Myshkin personally stands behind my husband’s murder. The brute.’

‘Because of this deal?’ inquired Mintbatten.

‘No,’ said Milla Ivanovna. ‘Because of Aleksey’s political ambitions.’

‘I see,’ said the Lord.

‘Money is everything,’ concluded El Guapo with a cunning shine coming from his dark brown eyes. ‘Money is politics, politics is money.’

Milla Ivanovna then proceeded to explain that the Boss's death was a tragic event but that the legacy of the late Kaganov must be preserved and that no greater sin could be committed than to yield to the sinister forces behind his death. She then sobbed and used a handkerchief to wipe her tears away.

'Are you sure you will be able to negotiate and do business with the very people responsible for your husband's death?' asked Mintbatten.

'Good question, Mint,' El Guapo congratulated him. 'Will this not be too much strain for you, querida?'

'Thank you, gentlemen,' said Milla Ivanovna. 'I shall be fine. I want to bring my husband's work to fruition.'

Business is fine, thought Golovkin quietly sitting in his corner and mumbling to himself. And you, Abogado Ituribe, you understand either everything or nothing. A Harvard graduate, someone said. Well done, doped to the core, poor thing. Must be hard to work for a mass murderer. Nice piece of work, our business partner, isn't he?

'Mr Golovkin here,' Milla Ivanovna said summoning the adviser's attention back, 'worked with my husband over a number of years and he is best placed to explain the strategy and discuss the details of our enterprise. But before I leave you to prepare the ground for our meeting this Friday, I want to make sure of one thing,' she said and turned her attention to El Guapo Medina.

'Sí?' he said.

'The diamond, El Guapo. The Russkaya Dusha, where is the Russian Soul?'

'The diamond,' said the Mexican baring his snow-white teeth in a smile, 'is... here!'

'Here?' repeated a chorus of voices.

'Yes, here,' said El Guapo kicking Ituribe in the shin. 'Give me the briefcase.'

The consigliere obliged and Medina placed the leather briefcase in the middle of the coffee table, a signal for everyone to jump from their seats and gather around. Medina lifted the lid and took out of the briefcase a dark green box. He pressed a barely visible lever and opened the box.

'The Russian Soul,' cried Milla Ivanovna.

'The jewel,' said Lord Mintbatten while even Ituribe showed interest and viewed this object over his Boss' shoulders.

‘The Russian Soul... in my possession,’ said Milla Ivanovna whose eyes seemed to have grown in size. Her hands were shaking as she knelt next to the table to caress the jewel.

‘It looks as the legend has it,’ she said, ‘exactly as the legend has it.’

‘Where did you find it?’ asked Golovkin.

‘Ha, ha,’ said El Guapo, ‘we Mexicans do know things, you know.’

‘Like, where to find precious jewels?’ interjected the Lord.

‘I found this beauty in the monkey’s cage of Frida Kahlo’s Blue House in Mexico City,’ exclaimed El Guapo with a large theatrical gesture. ‘It was guarded by a rattlesnake, a scorpion and a one-eyed eagle, travel companions of lost souls in search for immortality.’

‘Is that for real?’ said Milla Ivanovna.

Ituribe sat back into his chair as though he recognised a well-rehearsed drill.

‘Of course, it’s real,’ said El Guapo. ‘As real as the cold, bright stars in a Sonora desert winter night.’

Milla Ivanovna took the jewel and lifted it above her head. She sighed in admiration. The jewel seemed to explode in a galaxy of magical colours. She pressed a little button on the side and released the lid that smoothly opened, leaving on display a diamond composition representing a family, the Romanov family, a father, four daughters and a baby in mother’s arms - The Russian Soul.

‘And where is the surprise?’ said Milla Ivanovna with a shade of disappointment detectable in her voice.

‘The Orlov?’ said El Guapo.

‘Yes, the great diamond,’ she said.

‘I don’t know,’ said El Guapo, ‘that’s the jewel you wanted, that’s it.’

‘There’s another little lever here,’ said Golovkin pointing with a finger. Milla Ivanovna found the lever and pressed it.

The Romanov family rotated and sprung up revealing another compartment underneath. They all looked inside and there it was — the legendary diamond, the Orlov.

‘Catherine the Great and now... me,’ said Milla Ivanovna and launched herself with both hands towards the diamond.

‘Power and beauty,’ she cried as her eyes glowed.

Everyone hailed the splendour of the diamond and eventually decided to place it back in its natural dwelling, as Milla Ivanovna put it. So, they returned the precious stone to the lower compartment of the Easter egg and placed the half with the Romanov family on top. The Russian Soul was there, in the house of the late Aleksey Kaganov, in the hands of his widow and before the eyes of his business partners.

‘Once repatriated,’ said Milla Ivanovna, ‘this jewel will open the gates to the heart of Russia.’

‘Well said,’ commented Lord Mintbatten.

‘However,’ said Medina, ‘without wishing to rain on your parade, as they say in this country, what makes you so sure that this specific egg is so different from the others? Maybe other eggs display similar qualities and command a comparable degree of respect?’

‘Well, my dear El Guapo,’ said Milla Ivanovna. ‘Documentation is available that confirms the standing of the Russian Soul in the hierarchy of jewels and esoteric symbols. On the other hand, as you might as well know, I do have in my possession six other Fabergé Easter Eggs from the Romanov collection and a dozen others sold mostly in Europe.’

‘Your beauty deserves no less,’ observed El Guapo.

‘And you keep all these jewels here, in the house?’ inquired Lord Mintbatten.

‘Yes, I keep them in the drawing room safe. It’s next door. Come, I will show you,’ said Milla Ivanovna and made a gesture for the party to follow her. Even abogado Ituribe jumped on his feet and followed the party through a double door and out of the main study.

Only Senka Golovkin stayed behind and as the chatter died out he sat on the couch staring at the Russian Soul. During his chess career, he never sacrificed a piece more valuable than a knight. Sacrifices require elaborate and robust retaliation plans. The clock was running though, and the pressure in his head and heart grew by the minute. Things didn’t add up. He couldn’t put his finger on the offending spot but something wasn’t right. Golovkin detested rushed decisions and despised illogical conclusions. He feared irrational behaviour and tried to stay away from feelings. And yet, in a moment of complete abandonment, he jumped from the couch, shut the lid of the jewel and put it back into its green velvet coated box. He picked the box up and stormed out of the house.

Minutes later he was driving through the rain among the hills of the Uttlesford countryside. He switched the radio off, turned the wipers onto maximum speed, the headlights onto high beam and put his foot down on the accelerator.

XV

On a typically grey and sombre English morning, some serious people were having breakfast while browsing their trusted online news outlets.

Jack Sailgood sat at the breakfast table with Sarah, his wife of thirty-five years. Lady Sarah was a passionate home improver and gardener with many ideas and a handful of professionally drafted plans. Due to the Ukrainian crisis, Jack was rarely in England. Sarah stayed behind. The one thing that she wanted more than anything else in the world was that new extension to their south of England, Hastings home. She dreamed of having a house big and comfortable enough for their three daughters and grandchildren to come over for Christmas and to stay with them in summer.

While Sarah worked on her plans, Sir Jack sipped his English Breakfast tea and nodded. He had his tablet on the table and touched the screen with his left index finger. One article caught his attention:

Alvosa recently signed a deal to supply the auction house Sotheby's with large diamonds to market through its retail diamond division. Alvosa provided two diamonds weighing between 50 and 70 ct in the first sale of this agreement. The diamonds carry GIA grading reports... The local press noted an increasing problem with undisclosed synthetic or imitation gemstones, diamonds and pearls being passed off as natural.

Alvosa was the biggest Russian diamond producer but its credibility was dented by the production and sale of synthetic diamonds passed off as natural. Right, thought Sir Jack, the market wants diamonds and Khatanga can provide them.

‘They must manufacture these clouds and the rain. Not to disappoint the overseas visitors, I guess,’ murmured Tom Deutsch sitting at the breakfast table of his twenty-fifth-floor Pimlico apartment overlooking the Thames and the MI6 Vauxhall headquarters. ‘I can barely see the river, never mind the spy centre,’ he mumbled between two mouthfuls of black pudding.

Deutsch enjoyed a full English breakfast of fried egg, half a tomato, sausage, rasher of bacon, two slices of black pudding and two slices of toast with unsalted butter. That was more than he would eat in a whole day back in Washington DC. He managed to persuade the chef to serve him black coffee. That counted as a success. After breakfast, though, he felt like returning to bed.

‘Anyway, let me see the news before I make a move,’ he murmured some more and lifting the lid of his laptop computer. After a couple of clicks he found an article that caught his eye:

Before the Mirny pipe began producing diamonds, Russian engineers in Siberia had to find ways of overcoming the incredibly harsh conditions at the mine site. During the eight winter months in Yakutia, they found that steel tools became so brittle that they broke easily, like matchsticks, oil froze into solid blocks, and rubber tires shattered like fragile crockery in sub-zero temperatures. Furthermore, when summer came, the top layer of permafrost melted into a swamp of uncontrollable mud. Despite these natural impediments, engineers turned Mirny into an open-pit mine. Jet engines were used to blast holes in the permafrost, and enormous charges of dynamite were used to excavate the surface rock and loosen the underlying kimberlite ore. The entire mine had to be covered at night to prevent the machinery from freezing.

‘Right,’ cried out Deutsch. ‘Goodbye sunny Africa and welcome Siberia. The article fails to mention the political establishment, the Red Army, the nuclear deterrent and the gentlemen from various organised crime syndicates.’

Lord Mintbatten had just completed his morning routine and joined his partner Antonio at the breakfast table. Antonio was Sicilian and in his early forties, a self-declared expert in life-style choices and healthy living. He kept himself busy writing a blog named Antonio La Vita and keeping Davide in fine physical and spiritual shape with a complex routine of gymnastics, Californian Vayananda yoga, healthy food consumption, frequent exotic travel and *molto amore*.

‘We will live forever,’ said Antonio and put another slice of mango next to the feijoa on his plate.

‘You might, Tonio,’ said Davide while playing around with his laptop. ‘What about me? I will have to deal with that ghastly, abominable woman, her primitive taste and intolerable arrogance... And then, if that weren’t enough, there’s the macho Mexican gangster. Unbelievable. I am speechless, speechless.’

‘I think that you get upset too easily,’ said Tonio, ‘You need to keep your Karma in the right balance. It’s just a job, after all, *pazienza*.’

‘Just a job, easy for you to say...’

‘We need the money, I know.’

‘How did these people make their money? It’s one of the greatest mysteries of the universe, Tonio.’

‘Yes, it must be,’ agreed Tonio while attending to his fingernails as Davide began reading an interesting piece in the *Asian Market Daily*:

Exports from the Russian state diamond mine industry are set to get a huge boost as President Myshkin inks a long-sought deal with India’s Prime Minister Rhandi during his visit to the country next month. The potential long-term contract with Indian traders is a way for Russia to bypass imposed sanctions over its actions in the Ukraine, the *Economic Times* reports. It would make India a key hub for the trade of precious stones until now dominated by Belgium, Dubai, Israel, London, New York and Hong Kong. Furthermore, there is speculation that Russia is proposing the establishment of a Sino-Russian common currency with diamond standard that could seriously jeopardise the position of the US dollar as the world’s reserve currency.

‘A diamond Rouble?’ exclaimed David.

‘Diamond what?’

‘I just hope we have a back-up man to replace Kaganov and win the next elections in bear-land.’

‘Bear... Land?’

‘Yes, Moscovia,’ said the financial guru as he read on:

The Russian leader is also expected to address a joint session of parliament, an honour that is reserved for only a few foreign dignitaries. This, according to several media reports, may happen during the 15th India-Russia Annual Summit, to be held next Thursday in New Delhi. In April both countries signed a memorandum of understanding to share diamond trade data. India, the world’s largest diamond processor, accounts for roughly 60% of global polished diamond output in value terms. Last year alone it imported \$18 billion worth of rough diamonds and exported \$25 billion in polished precious stones. Avrosa generates around 30% of the world’s rough diamonds. Last year it produced a total of 45 million carats, about 98% of Russia’s total output.

‘Good grief,’ cried Lord Mintbatten. ‘That vile woman is to inherit a diamond mine and to control the world production of precious stones!’

‘*Magnifico*,’ said Tonio, clapping his hands.

Abogado Ituribe was up early. Having managed to avoid Maria Guadalupe’s morning tantrums he was calm and relaxed. He found a small Anatolian parlour around the corner where he had a spinach *börek* with *yoghurt* followed by a cup of *kahva* and rose-petal Turkish delight. He had his laptop open on the table and managed to hook it up to the Dorchester wireless service. He read the *Jewish Business News*:

Russian tycoon Viktor Goldberg, who has just bought a Fabergé jewellery collection from the Zerbos family, says he will put his acquisitions on public display across Russia. Yekaterinburg, in the Urals region, will be the first exhibition venue for the collection, which includes nine Easter eggs commissioned from Peter Carl Fabergé by Russian Emperor Nicholas II. According to the Yekaterinburg Bishopric’s press service, Goldberg has

chosen the city as the first destination for his travelling exhibition because it was here that the Emperor and his family died a martyr's death, an event commemorated by the local Cathedral of All Saints. The Fabergé exhibition in Yekaterinburg is expected to open some-time during the Orthodox Easter season. Its centrepiece will be what is known as the Coronation Egg, the one that Nicholas II offered to his spouse Alexandra Fyodorovna in 1897 to mark his ascent to the throne. The collection will then be shown to the public in other Russian cities, including Tyumen, Irkutsk, Moscow, and St. Petersburg.

In an underground facility near Denver, Colorado, an old man sat at a desk reading a paper document several pages long. The man was known as Mr Hank. No one remembered his real name or where he came from. What everybody in the underground world he inhabited knew was that Mr Hank was in charge. He didn't have a uniform or an official title. He didn't need one. His organisation didn't have a name, or a letterhead and his name never appeared in the newspapers or on television. His signature never adorned an official document. He was over a hundred years old and always young.

Mr Hank interrupted his reading and picked up two pills from a small white saucer. One pill was red and the other one green. They were designed and produced for him by a team of nutritionists working at the New York Rockefeller Medical Research Unit. He swallowed the pills and washed them down with a glass of water.

There was a knock on the door. At the second, timid knock, Mr Hank said, 'come in.'

A young black man in a white uniform came in. He carried a tray with a glass on it.

'I brought you your carrot juice, Mr Hank,' he said.

'Thank you, Augustus, you can leave it here on my desk.'

'Yes, sir,' said the young man and placed a tall glass on the table.

'Any news from Istanbul?' said the old man.

'Yes, Mr Hank, Dr Sönmez is personally taking care of the organs and will be transporting them here in the next two days.'

'All according to the given specification?'

'Yes.'

'The transplant team is ready?'

‘Yes, they are waiting for your instructions.’

‘Thank you, Augustus,’ said Mr Hank. ‘Being old is painful, you see. There is science, thankfully, to alleviate old age.’

‘Certainly.’

‘How is your family, Augustus?’

‘Fine, Mr Hank, they are fine. My wife is having some respiratory problems. Asthma, you know.’

‘Take a holiday, Augustus,’ said Mr Hank. ‘Take the family to Florida. Get out of the cold. Will you do that for me?’

‘I sure will, Mr Hank. Thank you very much.’

‘The Company will pay for your trip. Don’t worry, just go.’

‘Thank you, Mr Hank,’ said the young man. ‘Thank you from the bottom of my heart.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ said the old man, taking a sip of the carrot juice and continuing to read his papers. Augustus left the room without making a sound.

Mr Hank glanced at the first page of a document entitled ‘World Water Report.’ He then turned to page three:

Appropriate legal and institutional frameworks are required to guarantee that water resources are managed and used sustainably. These include laws and regulations whose enforcement ensures a balance between water availability and use. They also protect the resource against pollution and over-abstraction. Managing water across competing developmental sectors is required to ensure that benefits created for one group of stakeholders do not put others at a disadvantage. Water needs to be at the centre of a multi-sectorial dialogue, which includes decision-making processes and mechanisms for conflict resolution within the context of national inter-ministerial bodies, multilateral agencies and trans-boundary waters. Decisions that determine how water resources are used (or abused) are not made by water managers alone, but driven by various socio-economic development objectives and the operational decisions to achieve them. Progress towards sustainable development requires engaging a broad range of actors in government, civil society and business to assure that water is considered in their decision-making and to promote cooperation across disciplines, sectors and borders.

Mr Hank finished reading the report and then drank his carrot juice in one mighty gulp. The United Nations is a useful organisation, very useful. Not a word about privatisation in the report. Good work, good work. The legal framework is nearly ready. He picked up the next piece of paper that was sitting on the same pile. It was a print-out of a five- or six-line long e-mail signed by Tom Deutsch. Mr Hank took another piece of fruit and started to chew - slowly, patiently. He had read the message twice and still couldn't believe his eyes. He knew people could be untrustworthy or outright useless. But this man, Mr Hank thought, he was something else, in a league of his own. Was he trying to establish a new paradigm in incompetence? Too upset to dwell on Deutsch's shortcomings, he picked up the next piece of paper and read the introductory summary:

London. Scientists agree that the fate of mankind is contingent on the availability of the most basic resources such as water and air. While the previous period in our history was characterised by a race for commodities such as petrol, gas, gold and diamonds, the future will depend on the basic resources necessary for the continuation of life on the planet. Amazonia and Siberia are being widely recognised as of pivotal importance in the future race for these resources.

When he finished reading, Mr Hank switched back to the message from Deutsch. He read it four times and he still could not believe his eyes: 'Unfortunate. Slight problem. Both the Russian candidate and the jewel missing. Am in London taking care of situation. Will report back ASAP - T. Deutsch.

'This must be. Surely,' mumbled Mr Hank in disgust, 'the pinnacle of incompetence!'

XVI

Gorsky crossed the street with Knyaz on a tight lead. They were returning from their evening stroll. They walked past the Zionist Church playground and Gorsky looked around to check the benches. There was no one, all quiet. A lady walked a very small dog down the path. The puppy wore a tartan coat and she called him Oscar.

‘That’s fine, Knyaz,’ said Gorsky. ‘Let’s move on.’

Minutes later, they entered their apartment block and took the stairs. On the first floor, in the middle of the corridor stood Mrs Moustakas.

‘Good evening,’ she said.

‘Good evening, Mrs Moustakas,’ said Gorsky, walking on as if to avoid the neighbour. Mrs Moustakas made a quick step towards him and grabbed him by the sleeve. The situation in Greece was dire, apparently. Her brother-in-law had to sell his firm and was now struggling to meet the payments for their apartment in Kolonaki. To be fair, they didn’t need five rooms for they only have two children and the eldest of the two had left for Germany last year. But it was a matter of dignity for them. What was the world coming to? People need to meet their obligations, pay the rent. Gorsky nodded as he was paying his rent to the Moustakas and would have preferred to pay even more if that could only save him from Pelaskevi Moustakas’s impromptu monologues. Greece was dying, she explained with a sigh while holding his sleeve even tighter. The Mediterranean was dying, the ancient civilizations too. She then lowered her voice and looked around — the Turks were coming. One should never trust the Turks. Only stupid people trust the Turks. Her grandmother told her many times never to trust a Turk.

‘Mrs Moustakas,’ Gorsky managed to ask, ‘did your husband have time to cast a glance at the item I gave him?’

‘Ah, you mean the sword? Yes, I think so. Come in, come in... He is in front of the TV, as always.’

Gorsky entered the narrow corridor of the Moustakas' flat and followed the landlady to the very end and a wide room that featured an oversized TV set and Mr Moustakas sitting in a large armchair with a couple of beer cans and a full ashtray in front of him on the table. The pair exchanged a couple of Greek words that sounded like insults and Mrs Moustakas showed the visitor to a chair.

Before addressing Gorsky, Mr Moustakas made a sneering grimace.

'Go away, woman,' he said and waved his wife away. He then picked up the remote control and switched the sound off. Colourful footballers continued to run up and down the green pitch.

'Good evening, Mr Moustakas,' said Gorsky, 'sorry to interrupt you.'

'Hello,' said the host, getting up from his chair and leaving the room. He quickly came back carrying the red box.

'Your sword,' he said and sat back into the armchair.

'Well, it's not exactly mine,' said Gorsky. 'Did you have time to look at it?'

'I did, I did,' said Moustakas opening the box. 'It's a very well-made piece, very nice. But I don't think we can date it back to the 16th century, you see. The story that comes with the sword is good. This is certainly a product of a Lombard smith, that much is true. 18th century, I'd say. Late 18th.'

As the antiquarian delivered his verdict, Gorsky felt disappointed. Well, it was supposed to be the sword of the legendary painter, wasn't it? It didn't belong to him but still... It was a good story. Yes, it was a good story, that's all.

'It's not worthless, though,' said Moustakas. 'It's a nice item, comes with documentation and it can certainly attract buyers. I am willing to buy it. I can give you a nice, tidy little sum. As far as I understand, this belonged to the late Kaganov and now no one really wants it, right?'

'Sort of,' said Gorsky. 'Milla Ivanovna is not interested but she can change her mind, you know?'

'Sure. I can give you maybe two thousand for it? What do you think?'

'More, much more was paid for it.'

'Well, that's my offer. Up to you.'

‘Thank you, Mr Moustakas,’ said Gorsky and got up from the chair. ‘I can’t sell what is not mine.’

‘Very well But if you change your mind, I’ll be here,’ said Moustakas and pressed the sound button on the remote. Arsenal had just scored the equaliser.

Gorsky picked up the box with the sword, said goodbye and left the flat. Knyaz was sitting in front of the door waiting.

‘Let’s go, old boy,’ he said. ‘The sword doesn’t seem to be *the* sword.’

XVII

Gorsky went up the one flight of stairs in a couple of long strides that seemed to amuse Knyaz. As they reached the apartment, Gorsky took a set of keys out of his pocket. He found the right key, inserted it in the lock and suddenly stopped. Something was different. He couldn't be sure what but something was different. Was the doormat not in the right place? Was the light in the corridor different? Was it the smell of Indian spices coming from the Punjabi Tandoor takeaway next door? He couldn't tell. Knyaz began snarling and pulling.

Gorsky turned the key and opened the door. He stepped in and switched the light on. Knyaz wagged his tail and snarled some more, this time in one precise direction. At the opposite end of the living room there was a man sitting in the armchair. Mid-thirties, dark hair and eyes, medium build, he was one of those men that we often fail to register, whom we classify as unremarkable like the average bloke in the pub, the bloke from the office next door. He held both his hands on the arms of the chair, clearly visible.

'Privyet, Rose,' said the newcomer.

Gorsky stroke the dog's head, unleashed him and showed him to sit in the corner. He then turned towards the visitor:

'Privyet. What's the occasion?'

'I hope you don't mind but I took the liberty of pouring myself a drink,' said the visitor picking up a glass from the coffee table. *'Do you want one?'*

'I don't drink,' said Gorsky. *'Where did you find the vodka? I don't keep any.'*

'I know, I know... I mean, I knew that before coming so I brought some. My shout.'

Gorsky sat on the sofa and left the flute box on the coffee table. He looked at the visitor. Mark Hodayev. Many years later, but no mistake, Mark Hodayev.

'You look the same, Alex. Haven't changed much,' said the visitor taking a sip from the glass. *'I took a couple of rocks of ice from your fridge. Hope you don't mind, again. The bottle I brought was... well, not cold.'*

Gorsky recognised the visitor at once, but only now was he beginning to register the signs that the passage of time had left on the familiar face. The eyes were the same but sat deeper, barely visible through the narrow crack between eyelids. The face was longer, emaciated, the jaw stronger and the lips thinner. The visitor's hands were quick and steady, a tad too nervous perhaps.

'Ice is just about the only thing you will get from me,' said Gorsky. 'What do you want?'

'Ha, ha, the famous Russian hospitality,' said Hodayev. 'You wouldn't even offer me ice cubes!'

'If you asked me, the only thing you deserve is a piece of this steel,' said Gorsky nodding at the box on the table.

'What's that? May I?' said Hodayev making a gesture as if to reach out for the box.

'Go ahead.'

Hodayev opened the box, took the sword out and started inspecting it. 'Nice,' he said. 'Must be old and valuable.'

'Not old enough and not valuable enough, it seems,' said Gorsky.

'Nec spe nec metu, says here,' said Hodayev.

'It was sold to Kaganov as the sword of a famous Italian artist.'

'Caravaggio, I presume,' said Hodayev rather casually.

'How do you know?' said Gorsky genuinely surprised by Mark's expertise.

'I recognise the motto, the Latin motto. It is associated with his days in the Roman taverns.'

'And what else do you know?'

'It's all propaganda,' said Hodayev in a self-assured manner.

'What's propaganda?' said Gorsky already irritated by this visit and the strange turn the conversation was taking.

'The man who wrote the history of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Roman painting was Caravaggio's nemesis, a second tier, rather talentless painter whom our friend used to mock regularly. Hence, the story of Caravaggio as we know it was written by this guy and it's a fake.'

'You mean, that he killed a man and all of that?'

‘Yes, he did kill a man in a duel. The man, Tommasoni, was the pimp of Caravaggio’s favourite model. He deserved it, oh yes, he so deserved it, if you ask me. That Tommasoni had a powerful family behind him, a sort of local mafia, you see. Our dear friend Caravaggio, though, was brave or crazy enough to challenge him. And those were the days when duels were forbidden and the whole of the city of Rome afraid of standing up to bullies. There you go, the real and only truth about Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio! Told to you by your most humble servant, Mark Davidovitch Hodayev,’ he said and sliced the air with the sword. ‘To me this sword seems good enough.’

‘How do you know all of this?’ said Gorsky.

‘You forgot, my friend, that before meeting you in the beautiful and uplifting surroundings of the Caucasus I was a student of a great institution called the Art School of Voronezh.’

‘You studied that at the university?’ Gorsky was incredulous.

‘No, I couldn’t become an artist myself so I continued to be interested, let’s say. And, of course, I spent some time in Rome where I had access to the archives.’

Gorsky stared at his long-lost friend. He tried to imagine Hodayev rummaging through the underground Vatican records, the seventeenth-century police chronicles and civic libraries. But no, he couldn’t imagine that. A dark shadow followed his friend now, a very long and very dark shadow.

‘Private Mark Hodayev, sixth paratroopers regiment stationed in Chechnya, artist and traitor,’ said Gorsky with a wry smile. ‘What a nice career.’

Gorsky remembered their first encounter, sitting around a campfire in the military outpost in Chechnya: New recruits, all eighteen, nineteen years old. ‘You’re an artist?’ Sgt Perehovsky had asked pointing his finger at Hodayev, ‘That’s what we need here to fight the Chechens, girls and artists, ha, ha! Trapeze artists, clowns and jesters... Ha, ha!’

Hodayev jumped to his feet brandishing a knife.

‘Say that again and I’ll cut you to pieces,’ he yelled at Perehovsky gnashing his teeth.

It was a bad night under the full moon and someone would have been cut to pieces if it weren’t for Corporal Gorsky who separated the two. More vodka and a bottle of Georgian brandy suddenly materialised.

‘I am not a traitor, Alex,’ said Hodayev calmly from the depth of his newly acquired shadow.

‘Some people betray their country,’ said Gorsky. ‘Others betray their friends and brothers and that is worse, much worse. That turns them into Judases for an eternity and you will burn in hell and in the memories of those that you betrayed. Did you not know that?’

After the campfire incident, Gorsky and Hodayev became best friends. Gorsky bigger and quieter, Hodayev louder and always ready for banter. During that year of military training in the Caucasus they became inseparable, in the cold snow and rivers and in the heat of the scorching mountain sun. Five days before their first combat mission, the brigade’s intelligence officer, Major Ivanov, summoned them to separate interviews.

Gorsky remembered how he went to see Ivanov and was offered a seat. The major didn’t sit down; he kept pacing the office from one wall to the other. With his hand behind his back he would take the cigarette out of his mouth and deposit the ash in and around the ashtray.

‘May I offer you a cup of tea? I know you are not a great coffee drinker,’ said Ivanov carefully observing the expression of surprise on Gorsky’s face. ‘We have some English tea that you like, yes, we do,’ he said and ordered a cup of tea over the phone.

Ivanov made a point of demonstrating the full competence of the Russian intelligence services by mentioning that Ivan Borisovitch Gorsky, Gorsky’s father, had some problems in the school where he taught maths and physics. The new director that came from Moscow was interested only in the advancement of her own career and didn’t have any time for subtle local issues or staff with divergent opinions. And Ivan Borisovitch was one such man, said Ivanov. Irina Alexeyevna, Gorsky’s mother, was doing fine in the post office, younger brother Sergey played ice hockey and wanted to turn pro some-day. His great-grandfather was a prodigious sniper at Stalingrad, congratulations Gorsky. He served with Zaitsev, the legendary Zaitsev who registered two hundred and twenty-five kills. Alexander Ivanovitch Gorsky registered one hundred fifty-seven kills and died himself in a German air raid. He might have overtaken the legendary Zaitsev, you see? You are obviously of good Russian stock. Ivanov was relentless. Your first love, Natasha Prokhorska married her university lecturer, Ivanov informed him. They have a daughter. Your friend Igor Vorontsevitch is a medical student in St. Petersburg and a very good one too. Tomorrow he will become a doctor. What will become of you, Gorsky? What is your mission in life?

Gorsky took a sip of the English tea. It was warm and it tasted nice, served in a porcelain cup the like of which he hadn't seen in a while.

'You're nineteen,' continued Ivanov, 'not married, no profession to speak of. You work in a tin factory, you spent half a year in Siberia, you like martial arts and foreign languages. Why foreign languages? Why English? You like English music and want to understand the lyrics, right? You come from a musical family, Gorsky. Why no instruments? You had opportunities. You can play a couple of songs on the guitar, though. Correct?'

He made a brief pause, searched his pockets, before continuing.

'Do you love your country?' he asked. 'Do you love your country, Gorsky?'

Ivanov then went to a wooden cabinet and from a shelf took a tall, porcelain teacup and placed it in front of Gorsky. There was a red rose in the cup. A fresh, red rose. It smelt like spring, like the Caucasian plains on a sunny morning.

'Smell this rose, Gorsky. No poet has ever managed to do justice to the delicacy of its petals or the allure of its scent. Not Pushkin, not Yesenin or Mayakovski,' cried Ivanov and placed his hand over his heart.

He then began to recite, 'I know a rock in a highland's ravine, on which only eagles might ever be seen, but a black wooden cross over the precipice reigns, it rots and it ages from tempests and rains...'

That's where Ivanov stopped with a triumphant smile on his face.

'Oh, if I were able to rise there and stay,' Gorsky then continued, 'then how I'd cry there and how I'd pray; And then I would throw off real life's chains and live as a brother of tempests and rains!'

'Oh, we know our Lermontov,' said Ivanov and clapped his hands in admiration. Or, mockery.

'Yes, Major Ivanov, *we* know our Lermontov,' said Gorsky.

'Lermontov, the great poet of the Caucasus,' said Ivanov pointing at the ceiling for some reason.

He then went on to say that there was a river to be crossed at some point in life. Great men know when, where and how to cross it. No bridges, no rafts or ferries, just the fast, cold water of the mountain river.

‘Leave behind the smell of diesel and gun powder,’ said Ivanov, ‘ditch the wet and worn military uniforms. Forget the cold, iron touch of your AK—47, Corporal Gorsky. Your name was forwarded to me by your commanding officer. Best in the class, he said. The service I am here to offer is to the Motherland - counter intelligence. You will undergo five years of specialist training and you will then be deployed in one of our Western posts.’

Ivanov went through his pockets as if he had lost something.

‘You see this rose?’ he said, suddenly pointing at the flower. ‘It’s full of life and promise. Scent, can’t you smell the scent? You will have a decent, renewable bank account, legitimate business interests and apartments in major cities such as Rome, Berlin and London. You will collect information, establish networks... you know, that sort of stuff.’

Later that evening, Gorsky and Hodayev sat around a campfire and told each other about these interviews. They were both summoned and they were both presented with the same red rose. ‘Was it really the same?’ said Hodayev laughing. ‘Pass me the vodka,’ said Gorsky. ‘Your name will be retrospectively erased from the roster of this military unit... Ha, ha,’ laughed Hodayev. ‘First thing in the morning, you will travel to Moscow for further assessment. You cannot tell anyone about this conversation or your future work. You will be an engineer in state employment...’

‘And you will have a new name and new documents,’ Gorsky completed the sentence, ‘Ha, ha.’

They drank vodka, and then more vodka and gave an oath to each other not to accept Ivanov’s offer. We will never betray our comrades, they said, four days before their first combat mission. It was January. The snows of the Caucasus touching the sky.

‘Never, brother,’ said Hodayev.

‘Never,’ said Gorsky and they hugged and kissed each other, rolled in the snow, drank more vodka, smoked more cigarettes and howled songs about love and friendship.

‘The rose is just a metaphor,’ said Mark jumping to his feet and pointing his finger towards the night sky.

‘Do you understand metaphors, Gorsky?’ he said and they laughed.

‘Oh, if I were able to rise there and stay,’ announced Gorsky pointing at the sky, ‘Then, how I’d cry there and how I’d pray; And then I would throw off real life’s chains and live as a brother of tempests and rains.’

‘Hell, we do know our Lermontov, Major Ivanov,’ they cried.

Sitting in the little Cambridge apartment, they now laughed again. They laughed at the memory of the long lost, glory days.

Mark Hodayev sat in the armchair and Gorsky on the sofa. He was still wearing his dark grey coat.

‘How did you get in?’ said Gorsky.

‘I am a professional,’ said Hodayev. ‘Give me some credit.’

‘Professional...’ echoed Gorsky, ‘you received news that your mother was on her deathbed and you were granted permission to visit. Three days, to Moscow and back. Three days, but the sad truth is that you never came back. Now I learn why. You picked the rose and abandoned your comrades. You went along with the metaphor, shall I say?’

‘I am sorry,’ said Hodayev, ‘I had to perform my patriotic duty.’

‘Cowards don’t have motherlands. Cowards don’t deserve motherlands,’ Gorsky concluded bitterly.

‘I wanted to come back and tell you but wasn’t allowed.’

‘Tell? Tell what, to whom? Whom did you want to talk to, Mark? Save your words and breath for the underworld for that’s where you and I are heading.’

Hodayev took a lighter and a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He offered one to Gorsky who shook his head.

‘May I?’

‘No,’ came a dry response.

Hodayev returned the pack and the lighter to his pocket and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, ‘right, I knew this would happen.’ He then began his account.

‘In March 99, during the war in Yugoslavia, the Serbs brought down an American F—117 Stealth bomber. The pilot was evacuated but the aircraft stayed behind on enemy territory. The Serbs offered the vital parts to us in exchange for an S-300 anti-aircraft system and we agreed. The samples and electronics were then put on board a Tupolev 204 that transported the Russian Belgrade embassy staff and family members to Moscow. The Americans suspected what the cargo would be but that plane simply could not be brought down. That would be too much even by their enviable standards. The plane landed at Domodedovo airport and the FSB officer in charge of the operation, let’s call him Colonel K., reported mission accomplished

and died in a car crash a couple of months later. The F—117 samples were passed to the Chinese and the Americans didn't like it. To express their deep gratitude, they bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. When Myshkin came to power he became very interested in this operation. No need to tell you that all the money went into private pockets and that the Serbs never received the S-300. That was my first task. I was part of the team that carried out a covert, international investigation about this illicit transfer of technology and assets, as we officially called it.'

Hodayev picked up his glass and downed its content. He poured more vodka and sat in the armchair waiting. Alex Gorsky was there. He was the man who could tell the story of the 6th Parachute Company.

'Well,' Gorsky said with a sneer, 'we arrived there on 31 January. Ninety men, Rose, and only four lived to see the dawn of the next day. Up in the gorge of the Argul, our company met a two thousand strong Chechen force. The Chechens wanted to negotiate so that we bypass each other but Major Yevtuchin had orders to stop any enemy activity. He said no. No negotiations and no passage. The fight started in the early afternoon and went on for two days and two nights. In front of us the Mujahedeen, left and right the minefields where Yevtuchin lost both legs - retreat, not an option. General Lentsov couldn't send us reinforcements because of the minefields. We couldn't get any air support because of the fog. On the second night, just before dawn, Major Yevtuchin spoke to us on the radio. 'Russian heroes,' he said, and I can still hear his voice, 'We have no more than two dozen men left and are running low on ammunition. The enemy is approaching and the single shots you can hear are the Mujahedeen executing our wounded comrades. Come dawn the final assault will begin. We don't have the means to repel them anymore. I gave Captain Makarenko our coordinates and requested that they open fire on our positions and the enemy around us. It was my privilege and honour to have served with you...'. The artillery fire interrupted the radio communication as the first round hit his position. All hell broke loose. The Mujahedeen were upon us and we fought with bayonets and shovels, bare hands and teeth. In the morning, I realised I was surrounded by piles of dead bodies. It was carnage. We lost eighty-six men, three were wounded and only one came out of it unscarred - me. Eighty-six. The enemy lost six hundred in close combat and through artillery fire. I killed many men that night and I don't know how many. I fired my AK-74 until the man operating the PK machine gun next to me was killed so I took over. I might

have killed more than a hundred bandits, Mark. At the end, we fought with knives, bayonets and shovels, flesh against flesh, blood against blood. Once the artillery opened fire, the night sky erupted and a curtain of fire came down. The woods and mountains trembled.'

When Gorsky finished his account, a blanket of silence fell over the room. After a while, Hodayev got up from his chair and brought an empty glass from the kitchen. He put it on the coffee table in front of Gorsky and poured vodka. He then filled his own glass to the brim.

'I don't drink,' said Gorsky.

'You're Russian,' said Hodayev. "'One last time, for the Sixth Company!'

'One last time,' said Gorsky, 'for the Sixth,'

They both emptied their glasses and put them back on the table with a thud. It was an old tradition. Hodayev poured more vodka and raised his glass.

'For mother Russia!'

Gorsky sat immobile, staring at the glass full of vodka as if having other thoughts on his mind. 'For Mother Russia,' cried Hodayev again raising his glass and getting up thumping his feet. The glass stood still on the dark, flat surface of the table. Gorsky jumped on his feet, picked the glass up and threw it with the full might of his swing against the opposite wall where it exploded in a million shards and drops that sped across the room as through an expanding universe.

'For Mother Russia, private Hodayev,' said Gorsky. 'And all the spilt guts and brains!' Hodayev raised and emptied his glass.

'The theatre of our lives,' said Gorsky who was now pacing the room from one wall to the other stepping on the shards and liquor with his heavy-duty boots. 'Tell me, Mark, do you believe in what you are doing? Do you believe that your actions will change the world for the better? Do you think that you are fulfilling your humble human mission? In the morning, when you see your face in the mirror with no one around, are you satisfied, proud of yourself?'

Hodayev sat back in his chair. He always suspected there was such a thing as the day of reckoning. He thought it would feel like hitting a wall, an impact of a powerful, superior external force. He didn't expect an inner volcano to erupt and start burning and twisting his gut savagely.

‘Is it the vodka?’ crossed his mind but he knew, he knew full well that this was the moment he dreaded all these years, the moment when the masks, costumes and pretences would come off.

‘Let’s drink more vodka, Comrade Mark. Let’s drink more vodka and feel righteous, eh? Let’s drink and feel alive when everyone else is dead, how about that, eh? Wouldn’t that be great, Comrade Mark?’ said Gorsky and went to the kitchen from where he brought a new glass.

‘Pour more vodka, let’s drink vodka and salute our past,’ he said and put the glass on the table in front of the visitor who obliged and poured more liquor from the bottle.

‘To Mother Russia and her sons,’ said Gorsky, downed the content of the glass that he then smashed against the wall in nearly the same place as the first one. Hodayev emptied his glass and held it in his hand.

‘What are you afraid of?’ yelled Gorsky. ‘Are you afraid, Comrade Mark?’

Hodayev threw his glass against the wall himself. It bounced off it, fell on the floor and rolled under the coffee table.

‘My god, my god,’ cried Gorsky. ‘What did the FSB do to you? Ha, ha, Comrade Mark Hodayev defeated by an empty glass. What a spectacle.’

He sat back on the sofa, but his eyes seemed on fire, his hands restless as his mind spun in many directions simultaneously only to retrieve images and sounds that belonged to the other world, the other life, the other, the old, Alex Gorsky.

‘They gave me medals, you know,’ continued Gorsky. ‘I was alive, and they gave me medals. There was no one left to evaluate my behaviour in battle, but I was alive. The country needed heroes. As a token of gratitude, the High Command sent me to the military academy. I came out as captain and was assigned to the 106th Regiment of the 475th Airborne Division.’

Gorsky paused as if finding it difficult to remember the name. ‘In Beslan, the School Number One in Beslan, North Ossetia. On 1st September, the first day of school, the Chechen took more than a thousand people hostage, eight hundred of them children. They made people lie on the floor of the gymnasium with explosive ordinance on top of their heads hanging from the ceiling and walls. The siege lasted three days...’

Hodayev knew the story of School Number One in Beslan. Everyone knew the story that left scars on the Russian soul.

‘... On the third day, conflicting orders were issued. The police opened fire. Shooting and explosions inside the school started and we stormed the building. Two hundred children died and many adult hostages too. We lost all three commanding officers and twelve soldiers. That evening, when the siege was over, Colonel Ivanov congratulated our unit and said we would all get the Medal for Courage. I asked about our fallen comrades. They would get medals too, said Colonel Ivanov. And what about the children and the teachers of School Number One, I asked. He said they were civilians and unfortunate victims but that we defended higher state interests with valour. You see, Rose, I wasn’t brought up to live like that. I cannot thrive on such misery. I don’t understand these allegedly higher state interests and I don’t want to. They all pretend there is something very important and mystical. Rubbish! I faced enemies and death. There is no mystery. While still in the crib, I must have been touched by an angel. Got lucky. Gently, with his little finger this angel must have touched my forehead while I was asleep. No bullet, dagger or grenade can harm me, comrade Hodayev. It’s a curse for I was harmed on the inside and I couldn’t take it anymore. Colonel Ivanov, I said, you’re a fool. You’re a bloody fool. A drop of sweat or blood, a tear from any of these children is worth more than any of your stupid higher state interests. Oh, Colonel Ivanov, much more.’

‘I see,’ said Hodayev.

‘No, you don’t see, Mark. You have no idea what the void looks and feels like. You, with your state sponsored bank account and a top-secret list of duties. You are a mannequin with a time bomb, a commodity of the FSB programmed to shadow your own clone in a Manchester United or MI6 uniform. How can you from your cosmic altitudes see what the little ants on planet earth are up to?’

‘I need your help,’ said Hodayev holding his head with both hands and looking at the floor.

Gorsky stopped pacing the room. Like a wild animal in the forest, he sensed the sway of tree branches and the sound and smell of predators and prey.

‘Mark, ‘the Rose’ Hodayev needs my help,’ said Gorsky as if giving a statement and began to laugh. ‘Ha, ha, they need my help... You don’t need the help of the Argul hundred and the Beslan children... Ha, ha, you need the help of Alex Gorsky who had the misfortune to live long enough to learn about human nature and despise it. Private Hodayev, I do not care about your needs.’

‘I personally need your help, Alex. We also need your help, assistance, collaboration... Call it what you wish,’ said Hodayev and picked up a small, colourful canvas bag from the floor and placed it on his knees. He took a bunch of folders from it that he placed on the table.

‘What’s that?’ said Gorsky.

‘It’s the report on the Russian Soul.’

‘Really? Say no more, a report on the immortal Russian Soul. Written, I guess, by one of your FSB friends who must be an expert in the field.’

‘Read it,’ said Hodayev. ‘That’s all I’m asking you to do.’

‘I don’t care about your interpretation of the Russian soul.’

‘The British wrote it, not us,’ said Hodayev getting up from his seat.

‘I care even less about their interpretation.’

‘Read it. Once you do, we must meet, as soon as possible. There is a Chagall exhibition at the Tate Modern in London. I’ll be there tomorrow afternoon, four o’clock. It’s an open public space, safe. We can meet there.’

‘Go away,’ said Gorsky through his teeth.

Mark Hodayev came to the door, grabbed the handle and turned around: ‘Where is your boss?’

‘My boss?’

‘Yes. Where is Aleksey Kaganov?’

‘Dead, I presume,’ said Gorsky.

‘Are you sure?’ teased Hodayev.

‘What do you mean?’

‘See you tomorrow,’ said Hodayev, left the room and closed the door.

As Hodayev’s steps died out in the corridor, Knyaz howled and came to sit next to Gorsky’s feet.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘even you know.’

After a while he picked up Hodayev’s papers. A couple of pages. In English. Report, Strictly Confidential read on the blue folder. He opened it:

Fabergé’s Lost Jewel.

The last batch of documents released by WikiLeaks features e-mails and reports traded among embassies here in Moscow as well as e-mails sent by the diplomatic staff of Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom to business entities that operate in the City of London and Dubai. The content of these documents supports our view on the activities for the acquisition of Siberian natural resources. Useful information was also provided by Mr Aleksey Kaganov.

These documents are related to the legacy of the Russian Imperial House with special reference to the jewels, the graceful Easter eggs that Nikolay II Romanov commissioned from the Fabergé House. This with special reference to the 1905 egg named the *Russkaya Dusha*. Beyond its pecuniary value, this jewel possesses a mystical aspect that cannot be underestimated. It is a symbol of national and spiritual unity of Russia that also confirms the entitlement of the Romanovs to rule the country. The *Russkaya Dusha* might just be the key to the greatest reserves of natural resources on the planet. In the wrong hands, the jewel could cause a power struggle in the Kremlin thus jeopardizing the position of our partners in the current Government. If President Myshkin were to come into possession of the Russian Soul, his position would be significantly strengthened.

Rumours about the Jewel began appearing around the year 2000, which coincides with President Myshkin's accession to power. Such rumours attracted the attention of powerful Russian oligarchs, international intelligence and financial services and prominent criminal organisations.

There are many hypotheses about this jewel. Hard evidence is scarce. Did Agathon Fabergé exchange the jewel for safe passage out of the country? Did Leon Trotsky have the jewel in his possession? Did he use a representative of the International Communist Movement, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, to smuggle it out of the USSR and was the jewel meant to finance his vision of 'Permanent Revolution' and the overthrow of the Stalinist regime? Did Rivera try to sell the jewel in New York to John Rockefeller? Did the jewel seal the fate of Trotsky? And finally, what was the jewel's fate? It was last seen in the possession of the artist Frida Kahlo. Did she receive it from her husband, Diego Rivera, or from her lover, Leon Trotsky? The jewel vanished. Why is it reappearing now?

The Russian government has recently rehabilitated the Imperial Family and reinstated all their moral and legal rights. The Russian Orthodox Church has sanctified the last Russian Tsar, Nikolay II Romanov, his wife, Tsarina Alexandra Fyodorovna, their daughters Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia, and the Tsarevich Aleksey.

Until recent times, it was generally believed that the Tsar did not place his usual Easter egg orders with Fabergé House during the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese war. The Fabergé documentation is now accessible and it does confirm the existence of a commission for Easter 1905. The jewel was meant to celebrate the birth of the Tsarevich. The *Russkaya Dusha* is of exceptional value. Among all other gemstones and varieties of gold, the egg contains the legendary Orlov, the very diamond that Catherine the Great had built into her sceptre. The Director General of the Kremlin Museum, Elena Gagarina, summoned a group of leading world experts to examine the diamond in the sceptre held at the Museum. The verdict was unanimous. The diamond was undoubtedly of exceptional value. However, it was not the Orlov.

The Russian oil magnate Victor Dunstelberg has acquired, in a behind closed doors sale thought to be worth several hundred million US dollars, the largest collection of Fabergé Imperial eggs ever. He said in an interview to Russian television that it was his intention to build a church in Yekaterinburg dedicated to the Virgin Mary on the very site where once stood the house of the Ipatiev family where the Romanovs were executed in 1918. He also asserted that his aim is to restore the continuity of Russian statehood in all its pride and glory. Next to the said church, Dunstelberg is building a sumptuous mausoleum dedicated to Nikolay II and his family. The inauguration ceremony is planned for the spring of next year and the honour of officially opening this memorial complex has been bestowed upon President Myshkin.

If the *Russkaya Dusha* emerged on the market, it would command a breath-taking price tag. Nonetheless, it is our view that this is not likely. The jewel will most probably be bartered as part of a strategic financial or political deal. The geopolitical situation in the Ukraine, the Baltic countries, the Caucasus and the Middle East is further deteriorating. Confrontations in the Arctic and Pacific rims seem inevitable. For these and other reasons the change of regime in the Kremlin is a priority and the Russian Soul could prove to have a decisive role in such an operation.

‘Aleksey Kaganov,’ said Gorsky and threw the folder back on the table where it landed with a thud. ‘Kaganov found the letters...’

XVIII

Gorsky opened the door of his flat and Knyaz happily stormed out into the corridor.

‘Don’t go too far,’ Gorsky said. ‘We’re only going to the Moustakas. Zen will take you out today as I’ll be out of town.’ He shut the door and checked that it was firmly locked. The previous night’s intrusion hadn’t left any visible signs. ‘Mark is good at this,’ thought Gorsky. ‘Should have been an artist, an artisan or a smith at least. What a waste of talent.’

Paraskevi Moustakas opened the door wearing her usual flowery robe.

‘Can you imagine that these criminals have just raised the prices of gas and electricity again. And only last month they announced a seventy per cent increase in profit. Free market my fat arse,’ she said in lieu of a greeting.

‘Good day,’ said Gorsky while Knyaz, who obviously liked the flamboyant act of Mrs Moustakas, wagged his tail and stuck out his tongue.

‘Well, I hope that everyone has realised by now that the government in this country is totally corrupt and made up of thieves and criminals.’

‘Yes... Could I please ask you...?’

‘Fascist swine. Let me tell you that they are all fascist swine.’ She cried out before pausing for breath. ‘My grandmother used to curse the Turks. The Germans are worse, much worse. The bastards occupied and destroyed our country. Instead of paying the reparations they created this awful debt that decent working people cannot repay. Criminal, that is completely criminal.’

‘Sorry to interrupt, Mrs Moustakas. I must go. I wanted to ask you to mind Knyaz this afternoon and ask your son to take him out for a walk. I know that Zenon likes taking Knyaz out and if that is not too much to...’

‘The Fascists didn’t allow free speech. Didn’t allow any kind of speech, you know?’

‘I’ll be back later tonight. Not too late, I hope,’ said Gorsky handing the lead to the Greek woman who was obviously so enthralled by the subject of daily politics and fascism.

‘Yes, sure,’ she finally said. ‘Zenon is coming from school at five today. They can go out before dinner. We don’t go to bed before midnight. Don’t worry. By the time Stavros has watched all the football there is on television...’

When Gorsky turned around to leave, Mrs Moustakas grabbed the sleeve of his coat and said: ‘Ah, forgot to tell you...’

‘What?’

‘There was a man in the street last night, here in front of the building. I think he was looking at your windows.’

‘My age, medium build, dark hair, leather jacket with little bag...’ said Gorsky describing Hodayev.

‘No, not at all,’ said Mrs Moustakas. ‘This man was older, blond or white hair wearing a suit, had a tie... He came out of a big car that stopped at the beginning of the street and walked up and down. Stopped in front of our building and looked up at the windows.’

‘Are you sure he was looking at my windows?’

‘Mr Gorsky, maybe I don’t know much about world politics but the one thing I know is our street.’

‘Thank you,’ said Gorsky. As he stepped out into the street, he felt the cold wind on his face and hands. ‘Straight from Siberia, as they say here,’ he murmured. ‘They have no idea what the Siberian wind feels like, no idea.’

He found his trusted, red 98 Volkswagen Golf in Mill Lane, around the first corner. ‘Less than one hour to Redbridge, then tube to the city centre... I’m doing fine,’ he thought and started the engine. The traffic wasn’t heavy. He drove into East Road and at the Cambridge Royal Hotel roundabout turned left into Trumpington Road onto the M11 that would lead him straight to London.

Gorsky got out of the tube at St. Paul’s. He emerged from the underground, went along Paternoster Row and then, meandering among several groups of tourists and reached Queen Anne’s statue. He stopped in front of the monument and turned towards the cathedral. He liked that spot.

Gorsky continued on until he reached the pedestrian Peter’s Hill walk that crossed Queen Victoria Street. He slowed his pace and raised his eyes. It was a quarter to four in the afternoon and he was looking at the old power plant that now housed Tate Modern. He turned

around. No one had followed him. Good. He stood with his back to the Cathedral looking down the Millennium Bridge. Across the Thames he saw the tall windows and red brick walls of the Tate. He crossed the pedestrian bridge.

He was going to meet Mark Hodayev, after all. Why had Mark even come? Why had he come to London? Was it patriotism, friendship or fate? Gorsky felt a curious mix of anxiety and annoyance. He found himself in the middle of an affair he couldn't make much sense of. There was a dreadful storm out there in the high seas breaking masts of valiant clippers and filling merchants and seamen alike with awe and terror. What would he tell Mark Hodayev? He had no idea, but what he did know was that he couldn't stand on the side-lines and pretend it was none of his business. He wasn't the type, he had a spine.

Gorsky reached the end of the bridge that passed between Shakespeare's Globe Theatre to the left and the green patches on the right and was just about to turn left and take the stairs when his attention was drawn by a figure standing in one of the tall, narrow windows on the second floor of the Tate Modern. The windows were at the same height as the bridge and the figure looked no more than metres away, behind the thick glass. Gorsky knew the window very well, he had stood there more than once admiring the way in which the bridge and the Peter's Hill passage visually connected the old power plant building and the museum with St. Paul's.

The figure in the window moved and it looked familiar: medium height, dark brown leather jacket and a colourful shoulder bag. Gorsky stopped and raised a hand. He saw Mark turning to cast a glance out of the window. As he did so, an arm came from behind and wrapped itself around his throat. Mark's body hit the glass as he tried to free himself with both of his hands. He then lifted his feet and pushed against the window only to slide down slowly leaving a red smear on the glass. Gorsky ran down the stairs of the footbridge, through the main entrance and up the escalator. The passage was crowded and as he struggled to get through by shouting and pushing people aside, he noticed a dark-haired young man in a green jacket coming down in the opposite direction. The man glanced at Gorsky and ran downstairs.

Mark lay in front of the tall window that framed the passage to the Cathedral. Gorsky knelt next to the body and turned him over. The shirt was soaked in blood. Gorsky checked the stab-wounds and then looked Mark in the eyes. Hodayev was trying to breathe while his eyes were turning glassy. Then a gurgling sound and blood came out of his mouth.

'Stay, Mark,' said Gorsky placing a hand under Hodayev's head.

He then turned around and shouted, 'a doctor, quickly!'

'I knew you would come...' said Hodayev.

'Of course, you did,' said Gorsky. 'Don't go, we'll fix you.'

'You can't, Alex. You can't... fix...'

'Don't talk,' said Gorsky, trying to keep Hodayev's head upright and wipe his lips.

'Artist...' said Hodayev with a faint smile, '... or die in the high mountains... no good this way, no good...'

Hodayev's eyes froze. Gorsky lowered his head to check for even the faintest trace of breathing. There was nothing. He closed Hodayev's eyelids and lowered his head. He checked Hodayev's pockets and the bag. Nothing. If there was anything it was gone. He jumped up on his feet and realised that a small crowd gathered around them.

'A doctor, a doctor, I am going to get a doctor,' he shouted and walked away leaving Mark Hodayev's body in a pool of blood. He ran down the escalator and out of the building. He walked briskly up the Bankside to the Blackfriars Bridge where he crossed the river and reached the tube station. In less than half an hour he was sitting in his car at Redbridge and within another hour he was parking the car near his apartment building in Cambridge.

Gorsky remembered the young man on the stairway, the green jacket and his stare. He knew that face. He couldn't tie it to a time and a place but he knew the face. He was sure he knew the face. He got out of the car, reached his block of flats and his apartment. He had already inserted the key in the lock when he remembered the dog.

'Well,' he thought, 'better go and get him.'

He returned downstairs and knocked at the Moustakas door. He looked at his wristwatch; it was a couple of minutes past seven. Mrs Moustakas opened the door and greeted him with another tirade about Greek people being independent and freedom loving while the European Union was corrupted and the Turks just about to conquer the Mediterranean and...

'The dog,' said Gorsky.

'Ah, Knyaz, of course,' she said and yelled for Zenon.

At that very moment, a powerful explosion shook the building. To avoid falling Mrs Moustakas held onto the doorway while Gorsky was thrown against the wall.

'What is this?' cried Mrs Moustakas as her husband came rushing from the living room.

'A gas installation?' he said. 'It came from upstairs.'

‘Upstairs, yes. Get inside and shut the door,’ said Gorsky and ran upstairs.

The door of his flat was blown to pieces and thick, black smoke filled the hallway. A big chunk of the wall was missing too and a cloud of smoke lingered on. Gorsky walked in. The explosive device had been placed next to the door and probably connected to the lock. It allowed a dozen seconds from the time you inserted the key. You insert the key, walk in, turn around and ... Boom. Off you go.

‘Knyaz saved my life,’ he thought as he inspected what was left of the living room. He found the case with the sword in a corner of the room and he picked it up. He went through the bedroom, the improvised gym, bathroom and kitchen, collected a handful of personal documents from a drawer next to his bed and put them in his pocket. He picked the case and ran downstairs.

‘It looks like someone threw a grenade into my flat,’ he said without paying any attention to Mrs Moustakas’ screams and Mr Moustakas’ questions.

‘It must have been a mistake,’ explained Gorsky. ‘I have to go. It’s urgent. Take care of Knyaz while I am away, please. Thank you.’

He tapped the dog on the head. The interphone rang and Stavros picked the receiver up.

‘Yes, sure, come in,’ he said and pressed the button to open the door. ‘It’s for you,’ he said looking at Gorsky.

With a quizzical expression on his face, Gorsky turned around and made his way down the stairs. A shadow was coming up the stairs towards him. It was a skinny man whose movements looked disjointed.

‘Senka?’ said Gorsky in disbelief.

‘Alex,’ said Senka Golovkin standing in the middle of the smoke-filled stairway. His eyes were large and full of fear, his tie undone and over his right shoulder he carried a little red rucksack.

XIX

Jack Sailgood's ancestors had been members of the Army and Navy Club for several generations. The club occupied a building in Pall Mall Street designed in the mid-nineteenth century as an imitation of the famous renaissance Corner Palace that overlooks Canal Grande, the main Venetian thoroughfare. The club did not allow women in, of course, and the only exception to the rule was made in 1855 for the visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

Sir Jack chose to meet with his associates, Tom Deutsch and Lord David Mintbatten, at the Club. Private and friendly, it was the ideal venue to discuss something as secretive and delicate as the Khatanga enterprise. A car was sent to pick Deutsch up from Pimlico and Sir Jack greeted the guest at the entrance.

'Very few people get the opportunity to visit this place, you know,' he said while walking down a corridor with portraits of important uniformed people.

'Sure,' said Deutsch. 'Sure.' Being an American he wasn't easily impressed by pictures, stern tradition and ceremonial behaviour.

Sailgood had booked the Crimea private room on the first floor. He led his visitor up via a narrow, private stairway and they managed to reach the room without meeting anyone. The chamber was well appointed, with wooden panels on the walls covered with more stern-looking, uniformed men. A sumptuous Afghan rug covered the floor and on top of it stood a large oak table. The fireplace was lit and two corner tables featured decanters and half a dozen glasses. Sailgood sat his guest in one of the leather armchairs facing the fireplace.

'A Scotch?' he offered.

'Of course,' said Deutsch.

Sailgood poured the whisky and raised his glass.

'To your health,' he said.

'To yours too,' said Deutsch. 'When is Mintbatten coming?'

‘Should be here in a quarter of an hour,’ said Sailgood and cleared his throat.

‘Right.’

‘How is the family doing, Tom?’

‘The elder son is in his final year of law. The younger one is into IT and is also quite entrepreneurial. He’s an interesting character. He designed an online game environment with some friends, the Drone Zone. They’re developing the business model now as they want to become millionaires before their eighteenth birthdays.

‘Clever little buggers,’ said Sailgood. ‘The Drone Zone, sounds cool. What does one do in this Drone Zone?’

‘Well, they apparently developed a virus that can penetrate the Pentagon operative network and take over the commands of US Army drones.’

‘And what’s the business plan?’

‘Well, it’s a joke, a game, obviously.’

‘But tell me more, if it’s not a business secret?’

‘Ha, ha, no, of course not. Not for you at any rate. Via a secure web site anyone in the world can hire a drone to take out people, institutions, and vehicles... you know? If you are dealing with some evil, nasty guys you hire the ‘Drone Zone’ guys to take the baddies out.’

‘Something like the Ghostbusters?’

‘Yeah, just like the Ghostbusters.’

‘Are you sure this is legal, Tom?’

‘Come on, Jack. It’s just a game. Anyway, one could argue that this is only a model for the privatisation of state assets, right?’

‘Right,’ nodded Sailgood as the two raised their glasses and drank some more.

At that very moment, there was a knock on the door and Lord Mintbatten entered the room.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said.

‘Lord Mintbatten,’ said Sailgood, ‘we finally meet.’

After a swift round of introductions, Mintbatten was presented with a drink and sat in an armchair.

‘So,’ said Deutsch. ‘What is the latest on the death of this Kaganov?’

‘Well, the body that was recovered was charred, burnt beyond recognition. The wife made a positive identification based on the wedding ring he wore but...’

‘But what?’

‘Something is not right and I don’t know what. I don’t like it when that happens.’

‘And the woman is now in charge?’

‘The widow? That woman is a dangerous beast,’ affirmed Lord Mintbatten in the authoritative manner of a psychiatrist who had just examined a mass-murderer.

‘The Kaganov widow?’ said Sailgood.

‘Yes,’ nodded the Lord. ‘The woman is a prime example of the Asiatic kind of barbarism normally associated with Mongol hordes. She makes me think that Napoleon and Hitler were right about the Russians and Slavs in general... all Tatars, all Genghis Kahns!’

‘You obviously met her?’ said Sailgood.

‘Yes, indeed, I had that dubious pleasure,’ said Mintbatten and took a sip of the whisky as though the liquor could protect him against the evil spell of Milla Ivanovna.

‘What did she do to you?’ said Deutsch whose idea of darkness was closely associated with southern Voodoo dolls, pins and Caribbean dances.

‘What she said or did to me is nothing,’ said Lord Mintbatten. ‘Compared to what was done to her last night. There is justice after all.’

Both Deutsch and Sailgood held their breaths.

‘What happened to her?’ said Deutsch.

‘Mr Medina, the Mexican, was there and he brought the jewel, the Russian Soul.’

‘Yes?’ said Sailgood.

‘Well, it vanished.’

‘The jewel?’ said Deutsch.

‘The egg?’ said Sailgood.

‘Yes, the mad Russian adviser, Goloffkin -- or similar -- vanished with the jewel.’

‘The jewel’s gone,’ concluded Sailgood downing his whisky in a single mighty gulp.

The three bade farewell before midnight. They shook hands on the pavement in front of the Club’s entrance. Tom Deutsch said he was in a hurry as he had another appointment that

evening. He entered a long-base black limousine and quickly vanished around the corner while Lord Mintbatten and Jack Sailgood boarded Mintbatten's Bentley.

Tom Deutsch sat comfortably in the back seat of the limo. He checked the fridge and took out a small bottle of water that he opened taking a sip from. Between the front seats and the rear section of the car, there was a panel with various flashing lights and knobs. He pressed a button underneath the LCD screen and watched it come to life. He navigated the on-screen controls, inserted several passwords and reached his destination. The face of an old man appeared. He sported a yellow Hawaiian shirt and could have been eighty or a hundred and fifty years old. Deutsch had the sensation that the man was aging in a parallel universe. Indeed, Mr Hank aged differently. He was different.

'Does Sailgood suspect anything?' said the old man and put a piece of Kiwi fruit into his mouth with a fork.

'No, nothing,' said Deutsch, 'And Garriburton is on track to win the concession rights.'

'That is good. If that is the case, that is very good,' said the old man and took his dark glasses off. He had pale blue eyes and the piercing look of a rapacious animal. He produced a faint smile in one corner of his dark, thin lips.

'However,' said Deutsch and cleared his throat.

'Yes?'

'There is a problem that we didn't anticipate.'

'You didn't?'

'The Jewel...,' said Deutsch, 'Seems to have disappeared.'

'The egg disappeared, you say?'

'Yes, I am afraid so.'

'And who might have disappeared with this jewel, Tom?' said Mr Hank. His face came closer to the camera and filled the screen. Deutsch could see the deep wrinkles, the dots and the pores.

'A guy called Golovkin,' said Deutsch. 'He is... He was Kaganov's secretary and had access to the house.'

'What was the jewel doing in Kaganov's house?'

'Milla Ivanovna, the wife, invited Medina and asked him to bring over the jewel and he did.'

‘The Mexican brought the Russian Soul to Kaganov’s widow and lost it?’

‘Well, yes. Lord Mintbatten was there. He told us the story.’

‘Who does this Golovkin work for?’ said Mr Hank.

‘He used to work for the Boss; now, there seems to be only one man he is constantly in contact with.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘A certain Gorsky. In Kaganov’s employment, too.’

‘Russian?’

‘Yes, former military, now security officer. I asked the Central Office for details on him.’

‘I see.’ said Mr Hank.

The screen blinked and Tom Deutsch pressed the receive message button. ‘Here it is,’ he said.

‘Who is the man?’

‘Alexander Gorsky, retired major of the Russian army, paratroopers and SPETSNAZ, served in Chechnya and Caucasus, highly decorated. In 2008 suddenly appears in London and takes up employment as the security officer of Mr Kaganov.’

‘The FSB has the jewel,’ said Mr Hank and clinched his fists. ‘Damn, I should have known it from the very beginning. Ah, the damned Russians!’

‘The FSB? You think so?’

‘You bunch of imbeciles,’ said Mr Hank and swallowed another piece of kiwi fruit. He then took a blue pill. Deutsch kept silent. It didn’t look good. Things had somehow taken the wrong turn. The stupid jewel, the mad woman, the Mexican and oh, all those terrible Russians!

‘I want that jewel found. Is that clear? And no more blunders and infantile excuses. We are dealing with professionals, Deutsch. The FSB, the meanest of the mean, subversive mother-fuckers all-around,’ said Mr Hank. He hit the keyboard with his right index finger and his face vanished from the screen.

‘Of course, Mr Hank. Now!’

Tom Deutsch wasn’t very fond of talking to Mr Hank. That man had the uncanny ability to identify someone’s shortcomings, put them under a magnifying glass and multiply by a thousand. ‘Damn,’ he mumbled and began hitting his on-screen telephone pad.

XX

Gorsky grabbed Senka Golovkin by the arm and dragged him down the stairs. Once in the street, they turned left and swiftly vanished in a narrow lane. One carried a long case and the other a small, red backpack.

As soon as they were several blocks away from the building engulfed in smoke and the sirens of oncoming fire engines, police and ambulances, Gorsky grabbed Golovkin by the lapels of the jacket, pushed him into a dark entrance and pinned him against the wall.

‘What the hell do you think you are doing here?’ said Gorsky into his friend’s face.

‘I had to,’ Golovkin tried to justify himself.

‘You had to?’ said Gorsky, let the lapels go and stepped back. ‘Had to what? Take a deep breath and tell me what happened.’

‘Right,’ started Golovkin, ‘I was at the house with Milla Ivanovna. We were waiting for the partners on the Khatanga project, the Lord and the Mexican, when she started blackmailing me.’

‘Did she now?’

‘She knows about the old tapes.’

‘The tapes?’ said Gorsky who knew that Golovkin and Kaganov went way back but was never interested in the details. ‘The blackmail tapes?’

‘Yes, she has the tapes now and I don’t trust her. I cannot trust that woman.’

‘So, what did you do?’ said Gorsky not without hesitation.

‘I took the jewel,’ said Golovkin.

‘You... took the jewel. What jewel?’

‘The Russian Soul.’

‘You did what?’

‘The Mexican brought the jewel for Milla Ivanovna to see and while they were busy looking at her own collection of diamonds, I took the jewel and sneaked out of the house.’

‘And where is the jewel now?’

‘Here it is,’ said Golovkin, took the backpack from his shoulder and opened it to show the green box. Gorsky glanced inside the backpack, grabbed Golovkin by the collar and pulled him off the ground: ‘Let’s go.’

‘Where to?’ Golovkin tried to inquire but was dragged out of the entrance into the street. Gorsky walked quickly dragging the moaning Golovkin behind him. As they reached the little park next to the Zionist Church, they took the diagonal path to Mill Road when a group of hooded shadows appeared and blocked their way.

Gorsky went off the path and onto the grass with Golovkin behind him but the shadows moved, too. There were five of them. Two carried big beer or cider cans, one had a baseball bat and the fourth who was smoking a big, hastily rolled joint pointed a finger at Gorsky.

‘I know you,’ he said, ‘you’re the Russian fucker who jumped me!’

The man wore a sticking plaster across his nose, had a bruise on the cheek and a dark ring around the left eye. The one with the baseball bat raised his weapon and grabbed it with both hands while the other two took sips from their cans and laughed. It was just another evening on the streets, their idea of fun.

‘I don’t think we know each other,’ said Golovkin who failed to notice the body language.

‘Shut up, Senka,’ said Gorsky, pushed his friend back and turned to the gang. ‘Move it, we are in a hurry.’

‘What did ya saaay?’ said the baseball-bat hoody.

‘Are you running away from the explosion?’ said one of the can hoodies.

‘Yeah,’ said the hastily rolled joint hoody, ‘What’s the rush? You afraid of some boom, boom and fire?’

‘Let’s check your backpack,’ said one of the gang members throwing away his can.

Gorsky didn’t like bullies. He took the sword out and raised it up in the air. As everyone froze looking at the unusual weapon, Gorsky stepped towards the gang leader and brought the flat side down on his head with some force. Knees just gave in and he fell still holding the oversized joint between his fingers. As the rest of the gang stood immobile, Gorsky stepped

towards the baseball-bat man and made a stab at him with the sword. The hoody gasped for breath and concluded it was time for retreat.

‘A fuckin’ Samurai,’ he cried and ran to the safety of the bushes at the other end of the park. The two can-hoodies concurred. They dropped their cans and ran towards the bushes themselves:

‘The fuckers are armed,’ cried one of the two before they vanished into the dark.

‘I know you,’ said the gang leader who in the meantime had managed to get to his feet. He held his head with one hand and pointed the finger of the other at Gorsky: ‘I know you. You are the one who...’

‘I don’t like it when people think they know me,’ said Gorsky raising the hand with the sword again. The man turned around and ran into the night. ‘They are always wrong.’

Gorsky and Golovkin walked out of the park and down Mill Road where they entered a Middle-Eastern coffee shop with a half a dozen shishas in the shop window. The interior was narrow and long with a counter and kitchen at the bottom. It featured wooden tables and small stools. Gorsky chose a table away from the entrance, sat on the stool with his back against the wall, his knees high above the table itself, and he dropped his reassembled bundle on the floor. Golovkin sat opposite and placed his backpack on the table. There were two other groups of people in the shop, both smoking shishas close to the entrance. Gorsky raised a hand giving his partner a signal to be silent. He listened to the merry chatter coming from the other guests of the parlour and once he ascertained they were safe he nodded to the waiter and asked for two Turkish coffees. He had been to this place before. It was close to his flat and yet secluded enough to offer sanctuary for at least a quarter of an hour in case there were more police or other ‘entities’ roaming the area.

‘Who were those men?’ asked Golovkin.

‘Morons,’ said Gorsky. ‘Talk to me, Senka. What else did you or didn’t you do and who else might be happy to see us dead?’

‘Well, you see, Alex,’ began Golovkin. ‘I never mentioned to you the existence of a certain video tape...’

‘I think you also failed to inform me of the levels of stupidity which you are capable of.’

‘I understand, Alex. You must be upset with me and you are right to be so. However, you must listen to me. The Boss, when we first met, managed to film me in a very stupid situation with some girls. I had no idea they were underage. I swear!’

‘You? With underage girls?’

‘I didn’t know. I swear I didn’t know,’ said Golovkin. ‘I swear on my parents’ grave I didn’t know.’

‘And the Boss had these tapes all these years?’

‘He did and he called it his collateral, just in case. You know the drill.’

‘I know the drill.’

‘But I never had any intention of double-crossing him and I knew that he wouldn’t use them. I trusted him. As much as he could be trusted. He was predictably unpredictable, if you know what I mean.’

‘And now?’

‘Now that the Boss is no more, the tapes are in the possession of that woman.’

‘Milla Ivanovna?’

‘Correct,’ said Golovkin. ‘That woman is not someone I can trust with my life, definitely not.’

‘So, you decided to steal the jewel and exchange it for the tape?’

‘Yes...’

Gorsky leaned against the wall. Golovkin opened his mouth as if to say something but Gorsky stopped him by raising his middle finger. ‘Shhhh,’ he said. ‘Do not talk to me.’

After a couple of minutes, Gorsky made a sudden gesture and asked to see the jewel. Golovkin obliged by extracting the box from the backpack and opening the lid. They looked at the jewel in silence.

‘The Russian Soul,’ said Gorsky, ‘Here it is, in all its simplicity and beauty.’

‘Sure,’ said Golovkin. ‘But the real soul is different and to understand it you need to understand the poetry, the music, the history...’

‘I am not stupid,’ interrupted Gorsky with a frown. ‘This is just an expensive artefact, a jewel that happens to be called that. Thank you, Senka, where would I be without you? Probably wasting my time on a Volga riverbank, fishing, drinking vodka and feeling like the

king of the world. This is a unique jewel that only a complete imbecile could attempt to steal from the claws of Milla Ivanovna and the Mexican mass murderer himself.’

Golovkin gasped for breath and slid down the wall.

‘What are we going to do now?’ he muttered.

‘Now? What are we going to do now?’ said Gorsky. He grabbed Golovkin by the lapel. ‘Listen to me carefully now. We have a problem here, a very big problem that we need to solve before the problem solves us.’

‘I know, I know...’

‘Because of the Russian Soul, yes,’ said Gorsky and went on to tell Golovkin about Mark Hodayev’s visit, the existence of the report and the explosion in his flat. The only thing he didn’t mention was the sword, Caravaggio’s sword.

‘And why do you carry that thing around?’ said Golovkin pointing his finger at the wooden case under Gorsky’s arm.

‘That’s all I have left now,’ said Gorsky. ‘An old sword.’

‘Alex,’ said Golovkin, ‘Those are the same people — Hodayev’s killing and the explosion. They must be the same people.’

‘Probably.’

‘If Mark worked for the FSB and was after the jewel... The agency’s interest diverges from those of the Boss and Milla Ivanovna.’

‘How can they be different?’

‘The FSB works for Myshkin, right?’

‘Right,’ Golovkin agreed.

‘The Boss wanted the jewel to help get the Kremlin job, for instance. Milla Ivanovna and company now want it as a bargaining chip to soften Myshkin and get into Khatanga.’

‘Better with the Soul,’ nodded Golovkin.

‘Much better. And now...’ said Gorsky looking at the long case that was sitting on top of the red backpack, ‘we have it.’

‘The Khatanga mine,’ said Golovkin. ‘The Boss wanted to cut a deal with Moscow, I know that much. He wrote letters and tried to establish contacts. He wanted to barter the jewel for a safe return to Russia where he would agree to release his ownership rights to a state-run

company for the exploitation of resources. On the other hand, he might have had political ambitions.'

'I see,' said Gorsky. 'The Kremlin and the Boss become partners and our dearest Aleksey Kaganov returns safely to Russia, hands over the Russian Soul and the keys to Khatanga in return for immunity from any prosecution and, of course, a nice slice of the diamond cake.'

'A sound, simple and robust plan with only one tiny crack in the armour.'

'What do you mean?'

'Someone else is in the game and that someone can't afford to be hung out to dry, Alex. Garriburton will squeeze themselves in if it were the last thing they do in this life. Their deal with the Boss was that he wins the elections with their help and repays by handing over Khatanga.'

'And the Lord, what was his name?'

'Mintbatten and his crew are the financial purifiers...'

'Purifiers?'

'Aha, money comes and goes through his hands.'

'Where does it come from?'

'The money comes from the Mexican, Medina, and is invested in the exploitation of the Khatanga site inclusive of heavy machinery and bribes to government officials.'

Golovkin picked up the green box from the backpack and lifted the lid. The Russian Soul lay bare before him on its velvet bed. He knew that each Fabergé Easter egg contained a surprise such as a scaled down golden model of a train, the Winter Palace in Sankt Petersburg or the Hermitage Museum. He found the little lever, releasing the lid. Golovkin looked inside and lifted the top. A cleanly cut, solid diamond the size of a large chicken egg stared at him. Golovkin gasped in admiration, turning the jewel towards Gorsky.

'This is marvellous,' he said.

'This is the Orlov,' said Gorsky.

'The legendary diamond?'

'Yes, Senka, it's all in the report,' said Gorsky. 'It all started in Rome with Vatayev's murder. There's a method to it. Nothing is accidental. Vatayev was killed and his killer shot on the spot. This requires high levels of organisation, weapons, manpower and training.'

Motives, too. All professional stuff. The Neapolitan was hit by high velocity sniper fire and I wouldn't be surprised if it had been a Russian Vintorez gun. Stripped down to the smallest element, the gun is easy to transport and get hold of. At the time, I wasn't important so the shooter walked away. What happened in the meantime? What suddenly made me so important?'

'Mark Hodayev,' said Golovkin.

'Yes.' continued Gorsky, 'Most importantly, his report that connects the jewel with the Khatanga mine.'

'Zakhar taken out, the Boss dies...'

'The body was never found though?'

'No, it wasn't.'

'I don't trust that man,' said Gorsky. 'Even if he's dead I don't trust him. He must have had a scheme of some kind.'

'So, you think that the same people killed all three of them?'

'Not sure, Senka. The simplest explanation is often not the right one.'

'You know that the two Garriburton people are agents?' said Golovkin.

'What side are they on?'

'One British and one American. They are in it for themselves, though. They run a diamond business, might use the MI6 and CIA labels and logistics but they are essentially a private operation.'

'Did the Boss know that?' asked Gorsky. He didn't like the sound of these words. It was all getting too muddled and complicated. As a former soldier, he was used to receiving and giving clear instructions and orders, to being surrounded by trusted people in same colour uniforms. He hated traitors, liars and weasels. He disliked intelligence officers, spies and eavesdroppers. That was the lesson he learnt in Chechnya. Even Mark Hodayev was a bit too much for his taste

'He did know,' confirmed Golovkin, 'of course, the Boss knew.'

'And the FSB also knew that he knew?'

'Oh, they know lots of things.'

'And what are we going to do with that egg now?'

‘I’ll send an e-mail,’ exclaimed Golovkin with pride and assurance as though he had finally found the right course of action.

‘You will send...’ said a much less enthusiastic Gorsky, ‘an e-mail?’

‘Yes, to Milla Ivanovna, and I will offer to exchange the jewel for the tape,’ said Golovkin obviously proud of his scheme.

‘You do realise, I hope,’ said Gorsky softly with just a hint of irony, ‘that tapes can be copied?’

‘I’ll ask for money, too, and with that money I’ll change my identity and vanish.’

‘With the combined efforts of a Mexican drug cartel, MI6, CIA and FSB, not even cloning yourself a thousand times will get you out of trouble,’ explained Gorsky.

‘I’ll use a local machine,’ said Golovkin and pointed his finger to a computer in the corner of the coffee shop, ‘to open a new e-mail account.’

‘Do that quickly and we get lost,’ said Gorsky and dropped the jewel case on the table. The situation required thinking. Lots of thinking, and there were situations when not even thinking helps. He placed his elbows on the table and his head between his hands. He squeezed hard.

XXI

Two shadows crossed Mill Road and entered a narrow street where they ran into one of the porches. The bigger shadow wore a long coat and carried a large wooden case under one arm. The smaller shadow carried a backpack over the right shoulder.

Gorsky knocked at the door. By now, their phone records and the documents on their confiscated laptops would have been analysed and all contacts identified and placed under surveillance. They had nowhere to go except perhaps...

After the second knock on the door, steps were heard coming down the wooden staircase. Aptin opened the door, looked out into the dark at the two men standing in front of him.

‘Hi,’ he said.

‘It’s us,’ cried Gorsky.

‘Come in,’ said Aptin letting the two guests step into the corridor from where all three entered the living room. Gorsky dropped the jewel case on the floor while Golovkin placed the red backpack on the coffee table and sat in one of the two armchairs. ‘What happened?’

Before anyone tried to answer, an Andean tune echoed in the room. Gorsky took his mobile out of his pocket. ‘It’s Kathy,’ he said. ‘I have to take it.’

‘Hi,’ he said and, for a moment, just listened to what seemed to be a flood of words. Golovkin and Aptin looked at him with interest.

‘Listen to me, just listen,’ Gorsky said. ‘I cannot mention your name or any other references. I must destroy this mobile. They might be tracking me... I’ll call you from a disposable phone, right... Bye.’ He opened the telephone, extracted the SIM card and tore it to bits, squashed the telephone with both hands and placed the lot on the coffee table in front of Aptin.

‘Drop it in a rubbish bin somewhere far from this house, will you?’ he said. ‘My flat has just been blown to smithereens.’

Golovkin confirmed with a nod and moved the backpack a couple of inches to the left.

‘A bomb?’

‘Yes, a bomb,’ continued Gorsky. ‘We don’t have anywhere else to go’.

‘Who are those people?’ asked Aptin.

‘It’s all my fault,’ said Golovkin.

‘The bomb is not your fault,’ interjected Gorsky with a dry smile. ‘The rest might well be.’

Aptin felt the need to sit down.

‘What’s that?’ he said pointing a finger at the red backpack. Golovkin picked up the pack and took out the box. He opened it and showed the shiny, egg-shaped jewel. He then pressed the lever and lifted the top.

‘This is the Orlov,’ he said. ‘The favourite diamond of Catherine the Great of Russia.’

‘May I?’ asked Aptin taking the diamond into his hand. He scrutinised its weight, colour, cut... he turned it around several times with the flair of someone who knew what he was doing.

‘It’s fine.’ He smiled and finally said, ‘I can make one like this in a couple of hours.’

Golovkin attempted to smile but he only managed to produce an even more worried facial expression.

‘Say that again,’ said Gorsky and leaned forward towards the host. ‘You can do what?’

‘Make a synthetic gem stone,’ said Aptin.

‘This is a synthetic gem stone?’ cried Gorsky.

‘Yes, it’s a very well-made synthetic gem stone, grown in a lab but it is a synthetic stone.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Well, I can test it in my lab to be absolutely sure.’

‘Now,’ said Gorsky and jumped on his feet. ‘Can you test it now? It is very important that we know if this is the real Orlov or a fake.’

‘Now? Let me see the time...’ said Aptin looking at his watch. ‘Well, yes, I could test it now; my department is around the corner and it takes no more than ten minutes to get there.’

‘Let’s go,’ said Gorsky.

‘Let’s go,’ said Golovkin, jumping on his feet.

‘No,’ said Gorsky and pushed Senka back into the chair. ‘You wait here.’

Gorsky walked to the door and, while Aptin was putting his coat on, he extracted a bunch of papers from the inside pocket of his coat and turned to Golovkin.

‘In the meantime, you read this,’ he said and dropped the papers on the table. ‘Read this carefully because our lives depend on it. You understand?’

‘I understand,’ said Golovkin. He glanced at the title on the front page that read: Strictly Confidential: Fabergé’s Lost Jewel.

XXII

Jack Sailgood entered the MI6 headquarters through the entrance off Albert Street. He produced his ID, had his eyes scanned, passed through the x-ray hub and finally continued to the lifts. He nodded to the young woman at the desk headed towards a door to her right. She pressed a button and announced: 'Sir Jack Sailgood is here.'

Sailgood pushed the door handle and stepped in.

The office was wide and it featured a glass wall that offered a view of the Thames and the nightline of north London. Behind the desk sat a man in his early sixties. He had a shiny, clean shaven head and he wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up above the elbows. He seemed ready to throw himself into a brawl.

'Welcome, Jack,' said Gideon Dickinson, getting up from behind the table. The two men shook hands.

'Always a pleasure,' said Sailgood taking a seat. 'I love this view and this city. I also hate Moscow, Gid. I can sum it up in one sentence: I hate the place.'

'Can I offer you some vodka to ease your pain?' asked Dickinson. He stood up and walked over to a little cupboard in the corner of the room.

'Make it a whisky, please. Neat, too,' said Sailgood.

Dickinson opened one of the bottles and poured the drink.

'Here you are,' he said, offering a generously full glass. 'What's big bear up to these days? Is the government falling any time soon?'

'Not exactly, Gid. Not exactly.'

'I thought you were working very hard on supporting the development of democracy?'

'Yes, we sure are, but the Ukrainian and now the Syrian situation have gotten slightly out of hand. Nasty business.'

'Did we do anything wrong?'

‘No,’ said Sailgood. The two raised their glasses and took a first sip. ‘It’s the Americans I guess, the Germans... It’s a mess.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I am saying that with our usual diplomatic and intelligence contacts we’re not getting anywhere. There seems to be a paradigm shift in...’

‘Paradigm, you say,’ mocked Dickinson.

‘In international relations,’ continued Sailgood. ‘But you can read all of that in my report.’

‘Of course, of course. I will.’

The one thing Sir Jack Sailgood couldn’t stand about his long-time associate was that he seemed to know things in advance. The man could not be taken off-guard, ever.

‘Anyway,’ continued Dickinson, ‘you do remember Elizabeth, the girl from your office?’

‘Dudley-Vernon,’ said Sailgood, ‘the one we recommended for transfer to Teheran.’

‘Yes, that one.’ Said Dickinson. ‘She has a sister, did you know?’

‘Sister? I don’t think I did, why?’

‘Nothing, she works around here too, Jack. Isobel is the name and she has been assigned to this case, actually.’

‘You have the whole family working here for you, do you?’

Dickinson leaned over his desk and pressed a button on the interphone.

‘Will you ask Isobel to come over please,’ he said. ‘She is attached to the unit that monitors the movements of Russian immigrants with special reference to business migrants and...’

‘Oligarchs, you mean?’

‘If you prefer to call them that, yes,’ confirmed Dickinson. ‘This unit came up with some interesting findings. I want you to have a look at the intelligence for yourself and tell me what you make of it.’

Is this some sort of trap? Sailgood’s wondered. If Elizabeth’s sister is here so might be the Russian Soul report which means that the whole of MI6 knows about the Russian Soul. Do they know about Garriburton too?’

Dickinson pressed a button and the door opened. A young woman stepped into the office, carrying a thin black folder. She wore a trouser suit and appeared taller than the last time Sailgood saw her.

‘My God,’ he thought, ‘It wasn’t that long ago.’

‘Good evening or night, I suppose, Sir Jack,’ said Isobel Dudley-Vernon standing in the middle of the room.

‘Nice to meet you, Isobel. Liz has spoken so often about you,’ said Sailgood while Dickinson pointed at the free chair for her to take a seat.

‘Let’s start with the report from our man who infiltrated the Cambridge gang. It has to do with our Russian connections in the underworld,’ said Dickinson.

Isobel got up from her chair, placed her folder on the table and opened it. Both Dickinson and Sailgood leaned forward to see its content.

‘These are hidden camera shots from a park in Cambridge last night,’ she said as they began going through the set of large black and white photographs. ‘As you can see here, two men enter the park. The taller one carries a long case or a box under his arm and the shorter one carries a backpack. We have identified the second man as one Semyon Golovkin. He was in the employment of the Russian oligarch Aleksey Kaganov. He was his secretary and is now in the service of Kaganov’s widow, Lyudmila Ivanovna.’

‘And the other one?’ said Sailgood.

‘The other one is Alexander Ivanovich Gorsky, also an employee of Kaganov.’

‘What are they carrying here?’ asked Dickinson.

‘Well, the tall man, Gorsky, as we can see on these photographs,’ she said and displayed the prints on the table, ‘Carries a weapon...’

‘A sword?’ said Sailgood. ‘My God.’

‘A sword dipped in poison, perhaps?’ Dickinson interjected in an attempt at being funny.

‘Well, we don’t know if it’s anything of the kind, Mr Dickinson. What we do know from these shots is that the man walks around with what appears to be a sword fit for a museum. He dispatched the group of hooligans without trying to cut or seriously injure any of them.’

‘What did he do?’ said Dickinson.

‘He kicked them.’

‘Kicked them?’ said Sailgood and looked at Dickinson.

‘Karate, I guess, martial arts anyway,’ said Isobel. ‘The man seems to be an expert of a sort.’

XXIII

A black limousine entered Park Lane and pulled up in front of the Dorchester. Two liveried attendants sprang into action to open the doors. As they approached the vehicle, a rear door suddenly opened and an enraged man jumped out. He screamed and turned back to slap or shove someone on the back seat.

The man wore a white suit and a red, unbuttoned shirt. He had a Mexican moustache and swore in Spanish. When he finally approached the main entrance, a second man came out of the car carrying a briefcase. A large tear was coming down his cheek.

As the first man approached the entrance, the attendant bowed and said: 'Good evening, *señor* Medina.'

El Guapo stopped and looked at him as if trying to find an excuse for another shouting spree.

'You're kidding me?' he said.

'No, *señor* Medina,' replied the man. 'I would never dream of doing so.'

El Guapo then turned to the teary man who walked at a safe distance behind him and barked: 'Do you see, *abogado*? These people in England are all *cabeza loca*, brain-dead!'

Ituribe nodded and the attendant, who happened to be Chilean, opened his mouth to say something but then reconsidered his options.

'*Sí, señor*,' he mumbled with a bow.

'Having said that,' continued El Guapo while entering the hotel lobby, 'compared to those Russian *cabrones*, they look nice and fresh like a rose.'

'Russian women seem to be particularly mean,' said Ituribe in agreement.

Once in the lobby, Medina seemed to have remembered something important as he turned to his companion and started to shout, attracting the attention of a couple of Arab sheiks, Hollywood producers and German bankers who found themselves in the vicinity.

‘You stupid, drugged moron,’ he said. ‘You couldn’t keep an eye on one silly little jewel for fifteen minutes.’

‘*Señor* Guapo, I can assure you that...’ tried the abogado.

‘Don’t you *señor* me,’ roared the El Guapo. ‘While you were snuffing up your angel powder, those stupid Russians, the witch and that dog of a secretary...’

‘You think they are in cahoots?’ asked Ituribe.

‘Do I think so? You, stupid animal,’ said El Guapo making a gesture as if to slap the abogado again but refrained when he realised that all eyes were on them. ‘Where was my mind and what did I think when I employed you? Ah? Tell me, don’t stare at me, talk to me. I pay you rather handsomely to answer my fucking questions, do I not?’

‘Of course, El Guapo, of course. I am not sure though, that Milla Ivanovna planned the heist.’

‘You are not sure,’ said Medina looking around for a bat, a plank or some other weapon to strike his hapless advisor.

‘The woman is a great lady,’ stated Ituribe as if this were a matter of fact. ‘She looked genuinely surprised and upset. And why would she want to do that in the first place? You had already promised to leave the jewel with her overnight. She could have taken it later. It would have been much easier for her to come up with some sort of funny story.’

Medina considered taking out his gun and disposing of the abogado right then and there on the marble floor of the Dorchester’s lobby. But, just then, the door of one of the lifts had opened and a lady in an elegant crimson dress stepped out of it. She sported long black hair and wore red lipstick. She strode as if she owned the place. Guadalupe demanded attention.

‘Oh, *mi corazón*,’ said El Guapo managing to produce a wide, disarming smile. María Guadalupe had seen too many of those.

‘So, what do we have here, a great lady, ah?’ said María Guadalupe, making a sudden upward gesture with her chin. She disregarded El Guapo completely and turned her gaze at Ituribe. ‘Tell me more about this lady, abogado?’

‘Well,’ said Ituribe, ‘the lady, in question is a Russian business partner, you see. We were supposed to meet the husband who then mysteriously disappeared... he is dead, actually, and since he is unavailable...’

‘Since he is dead, right?’ said Guadalupe.

‘That is correct, yes. He seems to be quite dead and we met his widow Milla Ivanovna...’

‘Russian?’

‘She is indeed.’

‘Let me explain, *mi amor*,’ tried El Guapo but Guadalupe cut him short with a hand gesture. She then said: ‘You keep your mouth shut and you, abogado, tell me. Is she pretty, this widow of yours?’

‘Oh, yes,’ the advisor acknowledged, nodding. ‘Very pretty. Green eyes, blonde, with an elegant figure and dignified posture.’

‘Dignified posture, you say...’ she said looking now at El Guapo who realised that his chances were rather slim. He knew Guadalupe well enough to understand that this was the wrong way to talk to her. ‘If only this moronic Ituribe could get off his stupid white cloud for a second...’ he thought, shrugging his shoulders. ‘Too late now, anyway.’

‘The jewel has gone missing but it’s not our fault,’ asserted Ituribe with, given the circumstances, an enviable degree of confidence.

‘What was the jewel doing there in the first place?’ said Guadalupe with a frown.

‘We took it to the meeting with our business partners as a proof of our good will,’ explained El Guapo.

‘We did,’ concurred Ituribe.

‘So, you are telling me now that the whole egg has gone missing?’

‘Yes, a man took it while we were...’ said Medina but was cut short by Guadalupe: ‘And with the stupid egg the man took the diamond, right?’

‘Yes,’ concurred Ituribe.

‘No,’ said Medina, meeting Guadalupe’s quizzical stare. ‘The diamond was replaced by a fake. I still have the original you see. Did you really think that I would walk around with that diamond and leave it to the first stranger I meet?’

‘You might have saved the diamond but the egg is gone, *hasta la vista*. And all of this because of this green eyed, elegant Russian *señora*, right?’

Medina shrugged his shoulders and declined to admit that Milla Ivanovna, *la señora*, did have such eyes and that, well yes, she had an elegant manner of walking, talking,

gesturing... He glanced around the lobby and only then realised that they were standing in its very centre attracting too much attention.

‘Shall we perhaps go to our apartment and...’ he suggested tentatively, making a gesture as if to touch Guadalupe’s arm.

‘Get your filthy fingers off me,’ she hissed.

‘Guadalupe, please. Let’s go upstairs.’

‘You gave the jewel to that whore.’

‘No, it was stolen.’

‘But you wanted to give it to her in the first place.’

‘No, I just wanted to show it to her.’

‘Just to show it? Ha, ha, I can imagine. You are despicable,’ she cried raising both her arms in the air. ‘You traitor, you snake, you desert rat and low life vermin... After the ambush in Santa Clara, you come to me and ask me to patch your bullet holes. When those Maratrucha animals tried to sharpen their machetes on your stupid head and cut your arm off, you ran bleeding and crying to me. You and your green-eyed Russian whore. Next time go visit Siberia, you dirty *hijo de puta, te chingaste*, low-life scumbag. I hid you in the basement of my mother’s house from the *federales*, smuggled your dirty guns, brought you lunch in jail and served you and your bunch of useless *banditos*. And this is what I get in return from you. This? Another false step, *Guapito*, another step in the wrong direction and not even Siberia will be vast and cold enough for you to hide from me. Do you hear me? I hope the Aztec gods see this and descend upon you to tear your chest open and rip out that rotten, black, tiny heart of yours and feast on it while I watch, you...’

At that very moment, the tirade was interrupted by the arrival of Mr Morrison, the hotel manager, who humbly apologised and asked, with a broad smile and a discreet bow, if they wanted perhaps, to move to one of the private rooms on the ground floor and have a glass of champagne. Compliments of the house, of course. Mr Rupert Morrison was a very discreet and sensitive man. Guadalupe who spoke enough English to understand his body language thought she heard the word ‘quiet’. It was a word she didn’t like. She gave the manager a penetrating stare and, as the man kept on smiling innocently, she slapped El Guapo’s arm and turned back towards the lift.

‘We’ll continue upstairs,’ she said with an air of righteous indignation. ‘You are not getting away from me this lightly.’

Mr Morrison tried to explain that one of the adjacent apartments was now occupied by his sanctity the Archbishop Edelberto Valencia who had just flown in after a terrible ordeal involving bombs and terrorist threats as well as a thirty-hour-long journey from La Paz in Bolivia on his way to the Vatican.

‘Hell,’ crossed Medina’s mind. ‘The Archbishop and his entourage speak Spanish and if this woman continues the fracas, the other half of the hotel will also be briefed about our business in detail...’

As the party got into the lift, Medina turned to Ituribe: ‘I want the jewel back. No police, no inquiries, no more bullshit. I want that jewel back by tomorrow evening or I will strangle you both with my bare hands. Is that clear?’

‘Of course,’ confirmed Ituribe.

‘You two cage monkeys to return the jewel by tomorrow evening?’ said Guadalupe. ‘Ha, ha, I am really looking forward to having a good laugh over your dead, maggoty bodies before they get pissed on by iguanas and eaten by vultures and coyotes!’

XXIV

Gorsky picked up the TV remote control and pressed the red button. There was an item about Prince William's visit to a local farm followed by the death of two British soldiers in Afghanistan and a scandal involving corrupt politicians and bankers. Then the local, Cambridgeshire news. There was a group of people standing in the street and the journalist, a young woman, was just about to interview one. Aspiring to the image of intellectual reporter, she wore a pair of black-rimmed glasses. She explained that an explosion was had been heard in central Cambridge and that the TV crew managed to arrive at the spot at the same time as the fire fighters whose station was just around the corner and well before the ambulance coming from the not so distant Addenbrooke's Hospital. But without further delay, she would now interview a woman who lives in the very building where the explosion took place. After the witness, the journalist said that she would interview the local police to see if they suspected a terrorist attack or gang related-crime.

'Will you introduce yourself, please?' said the reporter to the woman in a colourful nightgown.

'My name is Paraskevi Moustakas,' said the woman, 'I live here with my husband Stavros and...'

'Thank you, yes, of course. Could you please tell us more about the explosion? You were at home at the time of the blast, is that correct?'

'I was right there in the corridor and just about to get out to water the plants, you see? I had my water can ready and I was just about...'

'Right,' said the blonde reporter who held the microphone in one hand and, with the other, tried to hold an unruly lock of hair that was falling on her spectacles. 'Could you describe the explosion for us?'

‘Well,’ said Mrs Moustakas tidying up her own hairdo with one hand and the nightgown with the other. ‘It was a very powerful explosion. So powerful that I nearly fell over in the corridor.’

‘And what can you tell us about the tenant of the apartment number seven where the explosion took place?’ said the reporter, still struggling with the lock of hair.

‘Mr Gorsky is a fine young man,’ said Mrs Moustakas. ‘I know him quite well as my son takes care of his dog, you see. He comes quite often to talk to me and my husband... A fine young Polish man, yes.’

‘Does he live alone in the flat?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Mrs Moustakas who by now was fully aware of the possible nationwide exposure of her performance. ‘He only had one visitor, a young lady... Brown hair, not too long, very slim body like that of a gymnast...’

‘Do you know her name?’ asked the reporter.

‘Oh, no. I never spoke to her, you see.’

‘And what did you talk to him about?’

‘Oh, he often speaks about international politics, you see? I come out to water the plants and he stops to have a chat and starts talking about corruption and the banking crisis, the war in the Ukraine, the financial crisis in Greece... You see? I don’t know much about politics. I am not that interested, we are simple people, we mind our own business,’ said Mrs Moustakas.

‘Thank you, Mrs Mustikis,’ said the reporter before turning to the camera. ‘As we have just heard, the tenant of the bombed is a young Polish immigrant who appears to be a political activist but we still don’t know where he worked or what he did for a living.’

The reporter then waved her hand and a bearded middle-aged man in a dark blue winter jacket joined her in front of the camera.

‘Good evening, Inspector McGallen. Are we potentially looking at a terrorist attack? This whole situation bears the hallmark of...’

McGallen raised a hand and interrupted her.

‘No need for speculations. The fire fighters are securing the site and my men are taking statements from potential witnesses. I’d like to use this opportunity to invite anybody who saw anything unusual in this neighbourhood in the past days or even week to come forward.’

‘I saw some people in the street the other night,’ interjected Mrs Moustakas who was still standing next to McGallen. When the camera switched to her, the reporter thanked the woman in the nightgown and turned to McGallen.

‘Inspector,’ she said, ‘what are the chances that something more sinister than a gas boiler explosion happened here?’

‘I would like us to keep our minds open as all the options are still on the table. However, I would certainly like to speak to the tenant of this flat, Mr Gorsky.’

As the wind blew and the reporter tried to fix her locks, McGallen looked straight into the camera and said: ‘There are indications that this explosion tonight might be related to a murder committed earlier today in London and the activities of an international crime syndicate that we have been monitoring for some time now. The victim of the said murder was a Mr Mark Hodayev, a Russian art dealer. Mr Gorsky, if you are watching this broadcast, do contact me personally at the Cambridge Constabulary phone number and ask to talk to me directly. My name is McGallen, Robbie McGallen.’

‘Well thank you...’ began the reporter when Gorsky switched the TV set off and leaned back in his seat.

On the coffee table lay the case with the sword. Next to it was the box with the Fabergé jewel. The apartment was dark and only a tame ray of light penetrated the cracks between the curtains and the wall. In the distance, he could hear the steady, reassuring flow of traffic.

‘He wants to talk to me...’ rang in his ears. ‘Why would a police inspector want to talk to me? To the owner of a flat that was blown up,’ thought Gorsky. ‘It could have been the gas installation. It’s too early to be sure it wasn’t. Could be a gang related crime, a random act of violence or... Did inspector McGallen, perhaps, know something that he couldn’t disclose to the public? Is he trying to connect the dots of a different trail? A trail that brought him to my door-step. Inspector McGallen... the law.’

Gorsky was calm. ‘It’s easy when you have a purpose and a clear vision,’ he thought. ‘Once you find yourself in a fight, you fight to the end. Mujahedeen warriors ran towards him yelling. He couldn’t hear the Allahu Akbars anymore, he couldn’t hear or feel anything. He pressed the trigger. And again, and again... Then, the clouds cleared, the night sky appeared with millions of cold, distant stars – one for each man who ever lived, his grandfather had told him. Before this night is over, he said to himself back then in Argul, there will be many more.’

He heard steps on the corridor. They were coming closer. Light, the steps of a woman. Quick. They stopped outside, in front of the door and a key entered the lock. The door opened and light from the corridor illuminated part of the room.

‘Hello,’ said Niusha, switching the central lighting on. Gorsky didn’t move from his spot. He had a plan. Not something you could articulate in words or on paper, no. He had a plan that made sense to him and that he could follow. ‘An intuitive plan,’ he would call it.

‘Alex, what are you doing here in the dark, all on your own? Where are Aptin and your cousin?’

‘Senka, yes. He and Aptin had to go, they will be back soon,’ said Gorsky.

‘Where did they go?’

‘They went to the lab for Aptin to check something he left there.’

‘Really?’ she asked with an expression of utter surprise. ‘He has never forgotten anything in the lab. That’s his sanctuary. He only forgets to bring his head home from that place.’

‘He didn’t forget anything,’ said Gorsky who didn’t care for the subtle difference between telling lies and not telling the truth. ‘They went there to test an item... The jewel.’

‘What jewel?’ she said, sitting next to Gorsky on the couch.

‘An important jewel, very important. Aptin just suggested it would be good to be sure.’

‘To be sure.... I see,’ said Niusha. She jumped from the couch taking her short jacket off. ‘Steve is doing the night shift at Canary Wharf, I imagine. Can I get you tea or coffee?’

‘No, thanks. Have you seen those fools again? Those who attacked you the other night?’

‘No, I haven’t but I know them anyway,’ said Niusha from the kitchen. ‘They often come to the shelter, you see?’

‘The shelter where you work?’

‘Yes. One of them, the one who said he remembered you...’

‘He will remember me now, that’s for sure.’

‘He used to be my local dealer, you know, in the old days. He is lucky to be alive. Aptin wanted to kill him, then you...’

At that point the phone sounded the ‘El Condor pasa theme.’ ‘Sorry,’ said Gorsky and picked the gadget out of his pocket. It was Kathy and he nodded while she spoke. He then nodded some more.

‘Was that your girlfriend?’

‘Yes, that was Kathy.’

‘You love her?’

‘I think I do. Why?’

‘I don’t know. Just curious, I guess.’

‘You always that curious?’

‘Oh, yes. You bet,’ said Niusha, laughing.

‘OK,’ said Gorsky. ‘Interesting...’

‘I think I do,’ said Niusha with a mock-serious expression on her face. ‘I think I love her.’

Gorsky shrugged his shoulders. There was no discernible way out of that predicament.

‘You don’t have any children?’

‘No.’

‘How did you meet? Let me guess, you saved her from the claws of a one-eyed Moroccan assassin and...’

‘Moroccan?’

‘Don’t know, sounds exotic. Was he not?’

‘Assassin?’

‘Yes, a killer?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about and where this conversation is going.’

‘Just chatting, small talk, getting to know each other. Relax.’

‘OK,’ said Gorsky. ‘I’ll tell you how we met and that’s pretty much everything you need to know. Is that alright? If you must know, she was the one who saved my skin.’

‘Alright, go on...’

‘Kathy was in my martial arts class. That’s how we met. She overheard a phone conversation featuring my name and the word ‘hospitalise’ in the same sentence she thought of alerting me. She helped me. OK? Happy now?’

‘Sure,’ exclaimed Niusha, ‘that’s the version you normally tell your aunty, I bet, huh?’

Gorsky didn’t say anything. Would more words help?

The television was switched off but the images he saw last remained ingrained in his mind. ‘Call Scotland Yard, Inspector McGallen, Robbie McGallen.’

The game was on. No boundaries, though, no time limit, no rules or uniforms. Zakhar killed, the Boss dead, Mark Hodayev murdered, the flat destroyed.

‘I am in it and they want me out. They want me dead. They didn’t mind me walking away in Rome but they do mind my presence now. Are we talking about the same people or are there several outfits contesting the same turf? What was the trigger? Why am I so important now? Because of Mark Hodayev’s visit. The report. That’s why he is out and I am next in line. Not to mention Senka’s antics with the jewel... That must have been the peak of their despair. Different players. There are different players in this but they all have something in common – the Russian Soul,’ mumbled Gorsky.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Niusha. She held a cup of tea in her hand and sat next to him. ‘To wait for Aptin’s analysis, I imagine, and then?’

The case with the sword and a blanket were on the table and the time was running out. They want the jewel. They will get the jewel at any cost. There was a scheme, though. There was one little scheme that might, just might do the job.

‘Can I ask you a favour?’ said Gorsky.

‘Of course,’ said Niusha. ‘Shoot.’

‘I’d rather not present myself in the street and I need something. Would you go and buy it for me?’

‘Yes, what?’

‘I need two pre-paid, disposable phones.’

‘I see,’ said Niusha. ‘You’re going high-tech.’

‘Sure,’ said Gorsky, ‘you got it. That’s the nature of modern warfare.’

XXV

Milla Ivanovna took the lift at the top floor of the One Canada Square building on Canary Wharf. She pressed the button for Level 3 and enjoyed the feeling of a controlled fall. Once out of the elevator she nodded to the car park attendant and walked straight towards her limousine. The man came running after her, threw himself forward and made it just in time to open the door. Milla Ivanovna entered the car and flopped into the back seat.

‘Let’s go,’ she said and crossed her legs to admire her new acquisition - a pair of 6-inch heel, knee high Miu Miu boots. She was pleased with herself.

The car moved slowly, got out of the underground facility and entered the traffic flow. After a couple of minutes instead of taking the M11 route north, the car turned left into the A406 orbital. Still busy admiring her footwear, Milla Ivanovna didn’t notice the change at first. When she did, she clinched her fist and pressed the interphone button.

‘Goran,’ she yelled. ‘Where the hell are we going? You Serbian dimwit. I said I wanted to go home.’

The driver pressed a button and lowered the glass separating the front seats from the rear and a familiar voice replied. It wasn’t Goran.

‘Hello, Milla. Surprised to see me?’

‘Alex? What are you doing here? What do you think you are doing here?’

‘I have the Russian Soul, Milla,’ said Gorsky holding the wheel tight with both hands. ‘The jewel.’

‘Ha, of course. That little toad Senka Golovkin ran straight to his dearest cousin. Oh, wait, wait, wait a moment. How silly of me not to understand that this little charade is your doing,’ said Milla Ivanovna in rapid-fire fashion. ‘FSB or private business? All I really need now was a lunatic war hero who suddenly remembers he is a Russian patriot and decides to steal my jewel and send it back to Mother Russia and Uncle Myshkin. And the Communist

Party. How much? How much do you want for the jewel? Name the price. Just say the price, give me the egg and take the money. I don't want to see either of you two anymore again in my life. Ever!

'And as soon as I give you the jewel you will post Senka's tape on YouTube and alert the police, I imagine,' said Gorsky looking at Milla Ivanovna in the mirror.

'What?' cried Milla Ivanovna. 'Alex, you and I have so much in common we could...'

'We don't have anything in common, Milla. Never had, never will and the longer it stays that way the better. I understand that the Boss had a certain videotape in his possession and that he blackmailed Senka with it. You know anything about it?'

'No, Alex, first time I heard of such a thing.'

'Milla, I know you have the tape or that at least you know where to find it.'

'Alex, I...'

'I don't have time for you, Milla,' said Gorsky and dodged a delivery vehicle that crossed on his side of the road. 'I want that tape.'

'OK, what else do you want? How much money? I don't have much cash at home...'

'Cut it. All I want is the tape. I don't want any money.'

'What?'

'I don't think it's something you would understand,' said Gorsky, pulling in at the roadside. He stopped the car and took the key out of the ignition. 'One thing, Milla. If a copy of that tape appears anywhere, anytime, believe me, that I'll come looking for you and I'll find you. You know I will.'

'Of course, Alex,' said Milla Ivanovna. 'When will you bring me the jewel?'

'I will bring the jewel to the meeting on Friday.'

'The meeting at...'

'Yes, to the meeting. '

'But I need it before so I can...'

'These are the rules, Milla. You'll have to trust me. Bring the tape and I'll give you the Russian Soul. Make sure I am on the list of invited guests as Boss' chief of security.'

'But the Boss, Alexey...'

'Sure. Tell him that...'

'But he's dead.'

‘Of course, the Boss is dead. You just pass the message, will you?’ he said and turned to face Milla Ivanovna. ‘Whatever agreement we had, the Boss and me, whatever contract, it’s not valid any more. The murder of Mark Hodayev was a mistake, a big mistake. Blood has been spilt and there is no way back now. Someone will have to foot the bill for it.’

‘Who is Mark Hodayev?’

‘Just remember the name. That’s all I need you to do...’ said Gorsky, opened the door and got out of the car. He pressed the activating card, double-locked all the vehicle’s doors on the vehicle and walked away. As he was turning around the first corner, he saw a group of local hoodlums approaching the car. Milla Ivanovna was trying to open the door banging on the windows with both fists. Gorsky dropped the car’s start card in the first manhole he came across. He needed to get away quickly. He needed to be somewhere else.

‘Time, time,’ thought Gorsky. He had a plan. Precision, timing and resolve, that’s all it takes to complete a mission. There will be variables, things no one can possibly predict, that’s true. But the plan was simple. All he had to do is to move swiftly, very swiftly.

Tired of hurting her fists on the bullet proof windows, Milla Ivanovna watched in horror as the local gang members brought in the gear to start dismantling the car. Crowbars, spanners, hammers, monkey wrenches... They were gearing up. She picked up her handbag and started fishing for her mobile phone. A minute or two later she dialled the security officer at One Canada Square. ‘You be here in a minute or you are dead,’ she screamed into the phone and then started giving her coordinates. Except that she had absolutely no idea where she was. The car was shut down and the GPS switched off. Her phone had GPS too but she had never used it...

A monkey wrench hit the front window and bounced back. A screwdriver tried to find its way between the front and the back door. Spanners were working hard on the tyres and someone was jumping on the roof of the car. Milla Ivanovna picked up her phone again and dialled the only number in the memory without a name against it. The number ended with fifty-two - 5 and 2. When the call was answered she said, ‘I have managed to trace the jewel. No I don’t have it yet, it will be brought to the meeting on Friday... Gorsky, Alex Gorsky, yes, he has it... He did say things, yes, he did, but... I trust him, yes.’ The chap jumping on the car roof had company. There was another one jumping on the bonnet and she lost the connection. She

crouched in one corner of the back seat, put her hands over her ears and shut her eyes. Milla Ivanovna was facing a couple of very long minutes now. Very long minutes indeed.

XXVI

Two scruffy looking men walked into the hotel lobby. The smaller of the two carried a little red rucksack over his shoulder and kept turning around. The bigger man wore a dark grey coat and carried a black carry bag. They mentioned to the porter the name of a hotel patron and were shown to a green sofa in the corner.

The two dropped their luggage on the marble floor and took a seat. The Dorchester was already buzzing. People were coming and going, chatting in half a dozen different languages. A couple of minutes later, the doors of the lift opened and José Saldero Medina walked into the hotel lobby, like a bull entering the arena and scanning for *toreros*, *banderilleros* and *picadores* to slay. His trusted lieutenant Ignacio Pachenga followed suit.

Gorsky saw the Mexicans and elbowed Senka Golovkin straight in the ribs. ‘Here we go,’ he said and the two stood up to make themselves known. El Guapo spotted Gorsky and marched straight towards him with a menacing expression on his face.

‘Are you that son of a bitch who has something that is mine?’ he growled, approaching and gesticulating widely. Pachenga followed. As he reached Gorsky, El Guapo suddenly stopped realising that the *Ruso* was tall and very large. He waited for Pachenga to catch up and rephrased his question: ‘Are you the Russian guy who wants to give me back my property?’

‘Yes,’ Senka mumbled and Gorsky pushed him back to the sofa.

‘My name is Gorsky and I have a business proposition,’ he said.

‘Say no more,’ said Medina mockingly. ‘You don’t seem to understand, *amigo*. El Guapo does business when and how he pleases. *Comprende?*’ he said and Pachenga nodded in approval.

Gorsky raised one hand as a sign of good faith and with the other pointed at Senka Golovkin. ‘It’s all my cousin’s fault and I apologise for it. He’s not very bright, you see, and I often have problems in controlling his unusual temper.’

For a couple of brief moments, El Guapo scrutinised the Russian duo. Pachenga raised his eyebrows.

‘However,’ continued Gorsky, ‘I have in my possession something that is possibly worth more than a simple piece of jewellery or a diamond to you. You are a man of action, Mr Medina, a native son of the Mexican plains.’

‘Right,’ nodded El Guapo. ‘You think that there is such a thing, worth more than diamonds and gold?’

‘Bravery and pride?’ said Gorsky.

‘Bravery and pride, ha, ha... I like that. You are not stupid. What a pity that you will be dead so soon,’ said the Mexican. Pachenga nodded in approval. He was a man of action.

‘I will give you the best weapon in the world. The weapon that killed two hundred in one night,’ said Gorsky.

‘What kind of weapon is that?’

‘It’s a Kalashnikov, a special edition machinegun designed and produced for the Russian special forces, SPETSNAZ. This specific piece bears the signature of its maker, the engineer Mikhail Kalashnikov and was used in the Chechen war.’

‘It bears Kalashnikov’s signature?’ asked El Guapo.

‘On the barrel.’

‘How many did you kill with this toy, you said?’

‘More than two hundred,’ said Gorsky, ‘in one night.’

‘In one night?’

‘In one night,’ confirmed Gorsky. ‘This is an absolutely unique piece. Just taking it out of the country gets you a lengthy prison sentence for high treason.’

‘And why do you want to give me this... gun?’ asked El Guapo obviously impressed by such a combat record. ‘Your friend has already stolen the jewel from me. So, you have... or rather, had them both.’ He added with a sinister and menacing stress on the word *had*.

‘I only have the shell of the Russian Soul, *Señor* Medina. Its heart is missing. The diamond in the egg is not the Orlov. It’s an excellent piece of synthetic gemstone probably produced in a Mexico City lab, but it is not the Orlov and I am pretty sure I know who has the real stone — you. I came to offer you a deal.’

El Guapo gave him a quizzical look.

‘How would you know that?’ he said.

‘We have labs in this country too, *Señor* Medina. Let’s keep it at that.’

El Guapo sized Gorsky up starting with the boots up to the top of the hair. He then turned to Pachenga and the two exchanged glances. Senka Golovkin summoned the courage to get up from the sofa and stand on his feet.

‘Where is that miraculous weapon?’ said El Guapo.

‘In a van around the corner,’ said Gorsky. ‘Let’s go.’

The four walked quickly through the busy hotel lobby without exchanging a word. Once in front of the hotel, they turned left into Deanery Street and walked for a couple of hundred metres until they reached a small white van. The sign on the side of the van was red: RentDirect, Van Hire. Gorsky produced a key, opened the back door and invited the guests to jump in. Medina and Pachenga exchanged glances. At the back of the vehicle there was a single wooden case with writing in Cyrillic script. Medina sized up the Russians and decided to enter the van. Pachenga followed suit. Once all four were in the back of the van, Senka shut the door and Gorsky lifted the lid of the case. The Mexicans leaned over its content. Medina asked for permission and picked the machinegun up in his arms. Both he and Pachenga scrutinised the weapon. They turned it around, found the safety, released the clip and checked the bullets. They opened the butt and put it in position. Medina took aim at a dot on the wall of the van. Looked down the barrel. Pressed the trigger, switched from single to rapid fire. ‘Why is this the best machinegun in the world?’ he finally said.

‘What is the worst it could happen in a fight,’ Gorsky asked him, ‘when your life depends on the weapon?’

‘The worst thing... the gun doesn’t fire, gets stuck.’ said El Guapo while Pachenga nodded in approval like a real connoisseur.

‘Give me the gun. Look at your watch and time me,’ said Gorsky, kneeling. ‘You keep the weapon in your left hand. Like this. Then you disassemble it and lay all the parts one next to the other. You reassemble the gun and you pull the trigger. Ok?’

‘Ok,’ said El Guapo.

‘Now,’ said Gorsky. He then disassembled and reassembled the gun. He pulled the trigger and the AK-107 said: ‘Click’.

El Guapo stopped the watch and looked in disbelief. Pachenga looked at the watch and then at his boss. Senka shrugged his shoulders.

‘So?’ said Gorsky.

‘Twenty,’ uttered Medina. ‘Seconds.’

‘You’re in combat, under incoming enemy fire. You need luck, you need skills and you need a weapon to keep you alive. Guns jam. They misfire when you need them the most. I fired bursts of three to four rounds on fully automatic for fifteen consecutive hours in sub-zero temperatures and used ten thousand rounds. The barrel turned red and stayed red for most of the night. This weapon jammed once, only once. I disassembled it in the dark, fixed and continued to shoot. I killed hundreds of rebels. They were armed too. Brand new flashy American weapons. They misfired, froze, jammed, got stuck and broke. I kept on shooting and that’s why I am now here talking to you. You fix this gun in under thirty seconds, *señor* Guapo, and you live. That’s the only difference that counts.’

‘Where did you fight, you said?’

‘I fought in Chechnya in the Russian army, airborne regiment. This was in the Caucasus, the now famous battle of the Argul Gorge.’

‘Famous?’

‘Yes, that’s what I said, famous.’

‘Why would I believe you? The story is good but how do I know it’s true? How do I know that you were there?’

Senka Golovkin who, up to that point, had been sitting completely silent and motionless, picked up his rucksack and took out of it a tablet computer and switched it on. He opened the browser, scrolled through the bookmarks and found the right one. He put the tablet down on the van floor and played a YouTube video. The title was Vysota 776 and the video showed the aftermath of a terrible battle that took place in the Caucasus between a Russian platoon and two thousand Chechen and Arab fighters. A couple of minutes into it, the journalist interviewed the two Russian survivors - two nineteen-year old privates. One of the two was seated on a fallen tree trunk, smoking a cigarette and had an obviously heavily used machine gun at his feet.

‘That’s you!’ cried Medina and looked at Gorsky.

‘That’s me,’ said Gorsky.

El Guapo watched the video and asked Golovkin to play it again. He checked the faces, rewound the video, scrutinised the weapon comparing it with the one in the van. ‘This one here looks like a young version of you.’ He concluded.

‘That’s me, yes.’

‘And the Kalashnikov seems to be the one.’

‘It is the one.’

‘How many people were there with you before the battle?’

‘Ninety.’

‘And how many survived?’

‘The two of us.’

‘How many enemies were killed?’

‘Six hundred.’

‘Six hundred,’ repeated Medina, obviously impressed. ‘How many did you kill?’

‘Two hundred, I think,’ said Gorsky modestly.

Medina and Pachenga exchanged glances. Gorsky picked up the machine gun and offered it to the Mexican who took and began looking at the many scars on the weapon’s body.

‘It fired all night and killed two hundred, you say?’

‘It did.’

‘So, you must be a big hero in your country, huh?’

‘I was, for a short while,’ said Gorsky. ‘As you can see, this weapon is unique. It brings you luck. I was lucky that night, Mr Medina, very lucky and that’s why I am here with you, now. It is unique and very, very precious. That’s why we are here. I propose an exchange. A small friendly exchange, I will give you this fine weapon and the synthetic diamond and you will give me the Orlov. The original, mind you.’

For a split second, El Guapo considered his options and then turned to Pachenga: ‘Go upstairs and bring the diamond from the safe.’

His right-hand man seemed to be startled.

‘El Guapo,’ he said. ‘What if Guadalupe finds out... We...’

‘Don’t you worry about Guadalupita. She is still sleeping and when it comes to the diamond, she can’t tell the difference anyway.’

Pachenga left the scene running.

‘You will give me the synthetic copy, of course,’ said Medina to the Russians and they both nodded simultaneously. Gorsky took an object the size of a large goose egg out of his pocket, opened the wrapping and showed its content. It was a perfect example of a synthetic diamond of world-class production. A piece of art that required a scientific lab or a diamond professional to establish it was not a genuine gemstone. Gorsky offered the stone to Medina who picked it up and slid it into the pocket of his jacket.

‘What does Guadalupe know about diamonds anyway?’ uttered El Guapo while playing with the Kalashnikov.

When Pachenga came back, he handed the little box with the diamond to Medina who passed it to Gorsky. El Guapo liked the gun. He liked the aura of invincibility too. Diamonds were for girls.

Gorsky pulled a key out of his pocket and threw it to Pachenga.

‘This is the key to the vehicle. Unload the crate with the weapon and drive the vehicle back to the rental agency. The details are in the glove compartment. OK?’

Pachenga nodded and Medina mumbled something that sounded like he agreed. Gorsky and Senka got out of the van, went down Deanery Street, left into Park Lane and took the underpass to Hyde Park. They took a short cut across the lawns and reached the tube station. At King’s Cross they changed lines and continued north. At the Redbridge carpark, they found the blue Volkswagen. A couple of minutes later they were on their way to Cambridge.

‘That scribbling on the barrel...’ said Senka interrupting the long silence. ‘It doesn’t say Mikhail Kalashnikov.’

‘No, it doesn’t,’ replied Gorsky. ‘It’s Cyrillic, he’ll never know.’

‘What does it say?’

‘Mark Hodayev.’

‘Why is that?’

‘When Mark vanished, I took his weapon. It was better balanced than mine.’

‘I see,’ said Senka who for a moment turned pensive only to come back with a new question. ‘How did you smuggle the weapon from Russia to here?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You did, Senka.’

‘I did?’

‘Well,’ said Gorsky. ‘Do you remember the one time when you asked for some furniture and your other belongings to be transported from Voronezh to London?’

‘You put that case with weapons among my belongings?’

‘Well, yes,’ said Gorsky. ‘I hope you don’t mind.’

‘No, of course not,’ said Senka with a wry smile. ‘Why would I mind? What could have possibly gone wrong? Me arrested for arms trafficking? Well, minor details in the grand scheme of the things...’

‘Thank you, Senka,’ said Gorsky. ‘I knew I could trust you.’

‘Huh, right,’ mumbled Senka.

In less than an hour they were in central Cambridge. They got out of the car and walked around the corner. As they were approaching Niusha and Aptin’s house, Gorsky noticed a couple of unusual shadows that appeared to be sneaking through the dark. When they were near their destination, a large shadow jumped out of a doorway with a shrill cry.

‘Ha, here you are,’ the shadow appeared to be shouting. He had a hood over his head and a baseball bat in his hands. As he jumped out of the cover and onto the path of Gorsky and Golovkin, an additional four or five shadows popped out and surrounded the pair. They wore hoods over their heads and waved chains, crowbars and wrenches.

‘Where is your sword now, Samurai, eh?’ said the baseball bat-hoodie, producing a sinister sound that was meant to sound as laughter. ‘Ha, ha, ha...’

‘Yeah,’ cried one of the others while another one added, ‘sucker!’

Senka Golovkin squeezed his rucksack tight against his body and got closer to Gorsky.

‘Alex,’ he said. ‘There are a couple behind us too.’

Gorsky was in a hurry. They had the diamond, they would get the tape, the meeting was on and there was still a tiny, outside chance that...

‘Step aside,’ he said to Golovkin.

‘Ha,’ cried the baseball bat hoodie waving his weapon through the air. ‘You must be joking, Mr Knight of the fucking Russian samurai order. It’s time for you to taste some of your own medicine. What did you think? You can just come here to beat up and bully whoever you please? Tough luck, mate. Tough luck,’ he said and swung the bat.

With his right hand, Gorsky reached under his coat and pulled out the Sig-Sauer. Now the baseball-bat man faced a serious proposition: the ominous, dark mouth of a .38 calibre gun. He froze with the bat raised in mid-air.

‘Don’t you move,’ said Gorsky and turned towards the other members of the little welcome committee who had all made their first step towards the two and found themselves now stranded in the ‘no man’s land’.

‘One move, one word and you’re dead,’ Gorsky said.

No one moved and no one said a word. They could have been transported directly to Madame Tussaud’s and exhibited under the title — The Clueless Gang.

‘I count to three,’ said Gorsky and pulled the safety on the gun off with, what sounded to the hoodies, a thunderous click. ‘Now turn around and run.’

And, of course, run they did. Not in the same direction, they just ran back into the dark and as far as possible from the Russians.

‘Fuck’n criminals,’ cried one.

‘Murderous bastards,’ complained another. They swore and moaned but never looked back.

‘And don’t come back,’ yelled Senka. He then turned to Gorsky.

‘We gave them a good scare,’ he said.

‘Yeah, we sure did,’ said Gorsky putting the gun back into its holster. ‘We need to get ready, Senka.’

‘You mean, that ready?’ said Senka and pointed his finger at the holster.

‘Yes,’ said Gorsky, ‘that ready.’

Senka Golovkin shrugged his shoulders.

‘It was always meant to end this way,’ he mumbled, ‘always.’

XXVII

Gorsky and Golovkin reached their shelter in Collier Street. Senka took the key out of his pocket and rushed to the door. He turned around once more just to make sure they weren't followed. Once they entered the corridor, Aptin came out of the living room and stood in the doorway. He was pale and his big dark eyes were even bigger than usual. He tried to say something, but no sound came out of his lips. Gorsky put a hand into his inside pocket. His Sig-Sauer was there. He stepped towards Aptin, moved him aside to cast a glance at the room. There was a man sitting in the armchair. He wore a short coat and smoked a cigarette. Gorsky removed his hand from the gun and entered the room. The man shook the cigarette and collected its ash in the palm of the other hand.

‘Good evening, Mr Gorsky. You know who I am?’

‘I know,’ said Gorsky. ‘Good evening, Inspector McGallen.’

‘Please do sit down,’ said McGallen and, with a wide gesture, showed the available seats. Senka and Aptin moved silently into the room and sat on the couch. Gorsky stood next to the door looking at the visitor. He wasn't quite sure what to make of his presence. Too many questions and too few answers, he concluded and decided to hear the policeman out.

‘I realise that I come here uninvited,’ said McGallen, a man in his mid-fifties with broad shoulders, a flat, boxer's nose, a mightily square jaw and short white hair. ‘We have a couple of murders on our hands though, and, as you will appreciate, there is a sense of urgency about it.’

‘We have nothing to do with those murders,’ cried Senka Golovkin jumping a couple of inches from his seat.

‘Of course not,’ said McGallen. ‘That's why I am here on my own. Let's say this is a social visit, shall we? Mr Golovkin, I believe?’

‘Yes, this is Senka Golovkin and my name is Gorsky as you, I am sure, already know.’

‘I was disappointed to see that your righteous Fravashi friends were not at home. They must be away plotting...’ said McGallen with an ironic smirk. ‘But don’t worry, I am not interested in your friends.’

‘Not my friends really,’ said Gorsky. ‘Acquaintances...’

‘Sure, sure. They are an interesting bunch, though. They feel they have been rejected by society. Unjustly, of course. Except the one who decided to kick society in the arse. A completely new situation in my line of work, you see?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, most of them were left on the margins, you see. Alcohol abuse, drugs, unemployment, nervous breakdowns, failed marriages...’

‘Ok, I get your point,’ said Gorsky. ‘Niusha and her lot are victims of your society.’

‘Niusha?’ said McGallen and turned to Aptin. ‘You didn’t tell him?’

Aptin shook his head, ‘No. Never had the chance and it’s not important anyway.’

‘It’s not. It’s not that important, you might be right,’ said the policeman. ‘But there you go.’

‘What is it?’ said Gorsky.

‘You think Niusha is a victim, persecuted by society? You see Mr Gorsky, that’s where you got it wrong. It’s my job to know, you see. Niusha Khanbaghi was the best student of her generation and completed a BA and PhD in Chemistry at Cambridge in under six years. It seems to be a world record. She won a gold medal at the Chemistry Olympiad. And that was apparently not good enough. She wasn’t happy with those achievements, you see? The only reason she completed her studies in record time was to be able to ‘dump the system.’ Her words mind you, from the Facebook page. So, she dumped the system — the career prospects, the academia, the whole Oxbridge prestige thing, the high tables, the gowns, the port and champagne. Niusha volunteers in the hospice for homeless people these days. Isn’t that right, Aptin?’

‘That is right,’ said Aptin, shrugging his shoulders.

‘So, we now have Aptin here to carry the scientific torch of the Khanbaghis,’ said McGallen. ‘Interesting family, isn’t it?’

‘I didn’t know,’ said Gorsky. ‘Didn’t look that way when I met Niusha.’

‘No, of course not. The young lady is inconspicuous, shall we say. Yes, inconspicuous is a good word.’ McGallen was obviously amused.

‘As I said, four murders in Rome and one in London,’ he continued. ‘An apartment in a peaceful residential block blown up. Police, you see, don’t like such things happening.’

Gorsky moved from his position next to the doorway and sat in the other armchair facing McGallen. This encounter was becoming interesting. ‘The murders in Rome and in London in the same sentence,’ he said. ‘That’s quite a leap, Inspector McGallen.’

The policeman meticulously extinguished the cigarette on the lid of a silver cigarette case and coughed a couple of times. He then returned the case to his pocket and coughed once more.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Apart from data gathering, analysis and decision-making skills we also possess the power of imagination, Mr Gorsky. As you can see by my presence here, we did gather the relevant data, analysed it, and here we are. Even more so, I used my, if I may say so, imagination and decided that the best course of action was to come here on my own and have a little chat with this Mr Gorsky who happened to find himself at several murder scenes and whose flat exploded. Lots of coincidences, you see. I may also add here an interesting observation. The said gentleman has also been in the employment of the Kaganov family. No need to remind you, of course, that Mr Kaganov himself apparently perished in a car crash.’

‘I understand.’ Said Gorsky. ‘Why not send the police force in and arrest everyone? That’s more like standard police procedure. Why bother with visits?’

‘Mr Gorsky,’ the Inspector said, ‘could we have this conversation in private, please? I appreciate that these are your closest acquaintances, but I think it would be better if we could...’

Senka Golovkin immediately assumed an upright position and looked at Gorsky as if asking: ‘May I?’

‘Sure,’ said Gorsky before turning to his friends. ‘You two, wait for me in the kitchen.’

‘Mr Gorsky,’ said McGallen. He moved forward, placing his elbows on his knees and assuming a confidential posture. ‘I am not a very popular person among my superiors, you see. There’s a body in the Tate Modern next to the Kandinsky or one of those Russian paintings anyway. A dead man’s body mind you. In Italy, a Russian businessman with political asylum in this country is shot dead. His wife, too. Same time and place, a man got killed by high calibre rifle fire and another one executed in a car. Call me superstitious but these are bad signs, very

bad signs. So bad that my superiors insist on apprehending the culprits while I can't help noticing that four of the five dead people are Russians. Interesting coincidence. Or, is it, Mr Gorsky?'

Gorsky sat in the armchair and listened carefully. He knew how to lower his heart rate to below forty beats a minute and keep it that way. He knew how to increase the oxygen intake. The one thing he knew he couldn't afford was to be nervous. People make mistakes all the time, people fail in their judgement, they do all sorts of wrong things at the wrong time when they are nervous. Gorsky liked to think of himself as being beyond such frailties.

'I came far, too far, to be stopped now. Think,' he whispered to himself. 'Think, Alex.' He nodded and McGallen continued.

'I don't think it is a coincidence, you see. If there were such things, there would be no organised crime, gangs, Russian and Italian mafia, oligarchs and the rest of the fraternity. There would be only random crimes and great police work. No, Mr Gorsky, there is a pattern to these and to many other crimes. You know there is such a pattern and I know that you know. So?'

'So, what?' said Gorsky.

'Talk to me,' said McGallen. Leaned back in his chair and took a pack of cigarettes and lighter out of his pocket. Putting the cigarette between his lips he lit it. He inhaled a mighty drag and blew the smoke in the air.

'No smoking in this house,' said Gorsky.

'I know,' said McGallen with a wry smile.

'Good,' said Gorsky. 'Let's talk.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

XXVIII

The streets were quiet, the whole town still sleepy. Senka and Gorsky were left on their own, Golovkin slept downstairs in the living room and Gorsky in the guest room. All the regular occupants were in London attending the pre-demo meet and coordinate the event. They had been there before, listening to their conversations and observing the preparations for the anti-globalist protests, Gorsky thought they looked like they were getting ready for Chechnya rather than for the London tube and anti-riot police units. They had water bottles, mobile phones, tablet computers, sleeping bags, thermal underwear and trekking boots. They had communication systems, procedures, passwords, usernames, code names. They owned credit cards and passports and they bought regular rail and tube tickets. They wore shirts with the iconic Che Guevara image and red, green and yellow stars, Russian army fur hats with the hammer and sickle. They would shout '*no pasaran*,' greeting each other at the door.

'Desirable opponents. They imagine they pose a threat to people like the Boss and his partners in the City, I guess,' mumbled Gorsky while looking at his own reflection in the glass. 'They will be treated as a threat, that's for sure. But do they really represent an imminent danger to the system? No way.'

Gorsky took the Sig-Sauer out of his coat and went to the kitchen. He put the gun on the table and next to it a small box of ammunition, a container with oil, a piece of cloth that he ripped off a kitchen towel and a pencil. He opened the window and sat down. The fresh morning air made him feel at home. Carefully disassembling the weapon, he placed the parts next to each other. He examined every piece and used the cloth to take off any dust particle or gunpowder residue. He wiped each single surface with care, wrapped the piece of cloth around the pencil and pushed it up and down the barrel. He then inspected the tube against the kitchen light and reassembled the weapon, reloaded the ammunition and put the safety catch on. He moved the gun to his right and looked through the window. There was still an hour before dawn. He took a deep breath. In the distance, he could hear the noise of a helicopter, then the sound of mortar shells exploding and machine gun fire. The air was cold but not as cold as the

one on the Argul. No, never that cold. The days of the Beslan siege ran in front of his eyes. No more war. No war, he thought. The gun was ready though, right there on the table. A different kind of war was coming.

The army had taught him to listen to the night and unlock its clues. He knew the sound of the wind and the gurgle of the stream. He learnt to tell animals by their call and movements, people by their deeds under extreme pressure. He knew the pulsating feeling of blood that runs through your veins and the moment in time that, like a sword, cuts life into what was and what is. Unlike in the Caucasus, he had a choice. At least it seemed that way. The endgame was nearing, and he wanted to make sure that he had a good grasp of the relevant details. Any, even the tiniest, detail might prove to be of crucial importance.

‘The Italian was planted to take Vatayev out,’ he thought as he went through the possible scenario. ‘Irina was collateral damage. The Italian killed Sergey first. He earned his trust, and then it was easy to pull the gun behind his back and shoot him. My absence made this possible. Why was I not there? The Boss asked me to pay a visit to the antiquarian and collect an item. The Boss. Why would the Boss want Vatayev out? The missing link number one. The Italian is shot dead by the sniper. Fine work, very professional. Double safety, kill the killer. The sniper had to leave his position and wasn’t interested in me. I got out of there and contacted Senka who informed the Boss. The Boss was unfazed. No hurry to collect the items from the antiquarian. It seemed urgent when he asked me to pick them up. Hours later it wasn’t anymore. Why? The old man said that the Boss was interested in the letters first, he picked up the sword along the way or... Was it to hide his interest in the letters? The old man said that the Boss sat in his shop and read a good part of the papers. That would explain why he wasn’t in a hurry to have them. He knew the content for he had read them. He just wanted to make sure that no one else had access to them. Then the Boss in Scotland. What was he doing in Scotland? Coming back from a business meeting with North Sea oil corporations, his car skidded off the road and all three passengers died. The other two were local, petrol people, not our regular security men. In both Rome and Scotland security was compromised intentionally. I was sent away, and the regular security was kept away from the Scotland trip. Interesting. Did someone take both the Boss and Vatayev out? Why and who would that be? Now we get to Mark Hodayev. Mark must have known much more than he gave away. He needed my assistance to get hold of the Russian Soul. But he had to ask me for help. Is that it,

did they not have a plan A? Maybe they did. They must have had a plan that went badly. Something didn't work out. The Boss wanted to return to Russia as a presidential candidate, he needed the jewel. Vatajev? What did he want? Did Mark Hodayev contact Vatajev? Is that it? Treason? Was he promised something in return for the Russian Soul? Did such a deal cost him his life? Did such a deal cost them their lives? Mark Hodayev dies at the hand of a man I remember seeing somewhere. I know that face and it will come back to me. Milla Ivanovna is cutting the deal – access to the Siberian resources, Kremlin politics and international finance. Enough reasons for many more people to get killed. Including me. I spoke to Hodayev and had the letters. I had a copy of the Report too. I became a target. Now that I have the jewel I am even more of a target. The Russian Soul. The spell of the Russian Soul. Four people died in Rome, the Boss and his escort in Scotland and Mark Hodayev. Eight people dead. If we count the Boss of course... Milla Ivanovna identified the charred body. If he is in hiding, who is after him? The same people who killed Vatajev? If both were targets, why not take the Boss out first? That would be a more logical sequence. Unless there is a pattern. There must be a pattern and a hand that pulls the strings, a puppeteer. They will come to the meeting, that's for sure, as no one can afford to miss out on a piece of this cake.'

While Gorsky was trying to imagine every conceivable scenario, and work out the possible outcomes, upstairs Senka was having a nightmare. He turned and frowned, sweating and breathing heavily. He fell into a bottomless pit, drowned in a red waterfall and hid from a kimono-clad Japanese secret agent. He then ran through a desert trying to escape a bunch of blood-thirsty, camel-riding Bedouins until he got stuck in a pit of quicksand where he was being strangled by an anaconda. He wanted to scream but his mouth would not produce a sound.

Thankfully, a clock somewhere in the building rang and woke him up. He was alive and grateful for it. He gasped for air and rushed to the bathroom where he splashed two handfuls of cold water onto his face and looked at the mirror. He recognised the face - it was him, Senka. He took a deep breath and walked out of the bathroom.

As he entered the kitchen, Gorsky got up from the chair and closed the window. The outside streetlights went off and the first passer-by hurried down the street. Someone turned the key in their ignition and the sound of an old diesel engine rumbled.

‘We’ll leave at nine,’ said Gorsky. ‘Put all your documents and the jewel in the rucksack and get ready. It is likely that we will not be coming back here so don’t leave anything behind.’

‘Right,’ said Senka while pouring water into the kettle. He needed a cup of black coffee and not even the prospect of the imminent Armageddon would make him reconsider his priorities.

A couple of minutes after nine the pair left the house on Collier Street. Golovkin carried the rucksack with the jewel and Gorsky the case with the sword. In one pocket, he had the Fabergé letters and in the other a Sig-Sauer with twelve reassuring rounds. They decided to take the train and leave the blue Volkswagen Golf parked in the street.

They walked to Mackenzie Road and turned left into Mill Road. It was early morning, and the street was buzzing with delivery trucks bringing supplies to Middle Eastern bazaars, Turkish coffee shops, Gyros takeaways, Indian, Tandoori and Chinese restaurants, Pizza places and convenience shops. Traffic was heavy.

Gorsky focused on the day ahead. In front of his wide-open eyes there was a procession of murderous and treacherous characters wrapped up in layers of intrigue. He had a sword, he thought, and swords cut through smoke screens. In one pocket he had the Fabergé letters. He had the jewel too.

Before the rail overpass they turned right into Devonshire Road at the bottom of which they walked under the pedestrian bridge, through the car park and arrived at the central rail station. The early morning rush of London commuters was over. They purchased rail and tube tickets and boarded the train. Gorsky put the case on the luggage rail and took a seat facing in the direction of the train. Golovkin sat down opposite, holding the rucksack firmly in his embrace. The two sat in silence, each with his own thoughts and fears. There was a sense of inevitability about their trip to London and the unfolding events. Like sitting in a bobsled racing towards the bottom of the mountain, the track frozen and narrow, the bends sharp and deadly.

‘It’s about self-control,’ thought Gorsky. ‘You always stand a chance in life, at least one. The thing is, you have to be quick and take it.’

As the train entered London Kings Cross, the passengers picked up their belongings and hurried up the platform. Gorsky and Golovkin boarded the Northern line that took them

south of the Thames. Half an hour later they arrived at Canary Wharf station. They took the escalator, reached ground level and spilt onto the street joining a wave of protesters that was moving towards the Canada Square Park.

Gorsky made sure he had a firm grip on his case and Golovkin, under his friend's watchful eye, embraced the precious rucksack tightly. They moved slowly with the tide of people towards the park. Golovkin read the slogans on the protesters' placards and banners. A bearded man with a woollen hat was asking 'What would Jesus say?' While another behind him wore a decommissioned German army uniform and carried the slogan 'Eat the Rich.' Next to him was a woman in flowery gumboots who declared that 'Robin Hood was right!'

It was all very amusing. He felt like the good old times they had read about. May '68, flower power, the Hippies... Capitalism contained its own contradictions, as Karl Marx put it. The way the system decided to deal with such contradictions was to make protests permissible and thus contain their critical and subversive edge.

'Let them Eat Big Macs,' cried a rainbow-coloured banner carried by a very skinny young man. 'Spare the Horses, Ride the Bankers,' proclaimed a slogan on the shirt of a middle-aged man with long, white hair. In one hand, he carried a bottle of water and in the other a whip.

'If Not Now When?' screamed the banner carried by two Jamaican men in Rasta hats who danced and sang along to a reggae tune coming out of a Smartphone. They were followed by a man who beat a small drum attached with a piece of string around his waist.

The stream of people flowed towards Canada Square Park between two banks of police in full riot gear. 'Pigs,' yelled a man next to Senka. 'They come to peaceful protests geared up and armed as if we were a bunch of bloodthirsty marauders or an occupying force. The real criminals are sitting in the very buildings they protect – swine.'

One protester waved the flag of Brazil and another one that of Jamaica. Alongside a red Ferrari flag, there was the Welsh dragon as well as a red flag featuring a green star. T-shirts bore images of Che Guevara, the Dalai Lama, David Beckham and Jimi Hendrix. People spoke different languages, clapped their hands and shouted slogans.

'Noah's Ark and the Tower of Babel put together,' said Senka Golovkin. 'This is what anarchy, and the end of the world will look and sound like.'

Gorsky didn't say a word. He understood Senka's preference for a world without ferment that runs like a well-oiled machine, for a system that operates without disruptions and for people who keep their opinions to themselves. Gorsky, on the other hand, wasn't afraid of change or the consequences of his own actions. He understood the nature of struggle.

Eventually, they reached their destination and stepped out of the human river. Gorsky grabbed Senka by the jacket and nearly lifted him to the safety of a concrete plant pot. From this vantage position, Gorsky began to scrutinise the crowd. From here he could see the police cordon, the metal fence and anti-vehicle concrete barriers in front of the building he was going to. He spotted the antiterrorist unit, standing next to a couple of armoured vehicles. While the noise level increased by the minute, Gorsky remembered that the Fravashi team was allocated a place right in front of the covered stage towards the northern side of the park. That area was clearly full, and he was sure that Niusha's friends had arrived in good time to claim their strategic spot.

The two jumped down from the huge pot and continued their march towards the entrance. Did Milla Ivanovna instruct the security officers and the police? Well, there was only one way to find out.

'No entrance, no jewel, Milla Ivanovna,' he said to himself clearing his way through layer upon layer of ecstatic demonstrators. When they reached the first line of policemen, Gorsky showed his British passport and gave the officer a piece of paper with an address, telephone number and the name Milla Ivanovna on it. As he and Senka stood waiting to be admitted to the building, Gorsky spotted a tall, blond man exiting accompanied by a policeman. The man wore a dark green velvet jacket and jeans. He tapped the policeman on the shoulder and vanished in the opposite direction.

'Senka,' cried Gorsky grabbing Golovkin's arm. 'You have to reach the Fravashis.'

'Fravash... what?'

'Niusha and her crew, it's important.'

'And how do you think I can find them in this mayhem?' he said making a wide gesture towards the adjacent sea of people.

'We know exactly where they are. You will find them in front of the stage,' said Gorsky and pointed in the direction of the stage. 'Right there.'

'But...'

‘Senka, I know what you want to say but this is important. Listen to me. Leave the rucksack with me. I will deliver the jewel. You go over there and pass a message to Niusha, Aptin or Steve. No one else, do you understand me? You must find one of those three.’

‘And tell them what?’

‘Tell them that we saw Nick Hershaw coming out of this building in the company of an agent. They are up to something and I don’t like it.’

‘I thought Nick was one of them. What are you talking about?’

‘They suspected him of being an infiltrated agent for quite some time. Don’t worry. They will know what to do. You just go there and pass the message. Give me the jewel,’ said Gorsky.

Senka hesitated. He then took the rucksack off his shoulder and passed it to Gorsky.

‘Don’t do anything too stupid,’ he told Gorsky.

‘Senka, no matter what happens, you hide and wait for me to get in touch. It might take a day or two, a week or two, but I’ll find you. Keep in touch with Niusha and you’ll be fine.’

‘And the jewel?’ asked Golovkin with an anxious expression on his face.

‘Go, Senka,’ said Gorsky and turned towards the entrance of the skyscraper where two security officers were looking at him and exchanging words.

‘Fiftieth floor, RM & CEN security officer to attend a meeting. My name will be on the list,’ he explained to the officers, trusting that Milla Ivanovna had stuck to their bargain. The name Gorsky was indeed on the list and one of the officers ticked it. Gorsky produced his passport and the permit to carry arms. He was on duty, he said, as per strict instructions from Milla Ivanovna. He opened the case and produced the artefact belonging to the Kaganov widow. He displayed the Russian Soul and said that it was his duty to deliver the jewel. While he was at the security check point, he saw a man waiting in the lobby. Mid-height, stocky and bearded, he was scrolling through his mobile phone. As soon as he cleared security, Gorsky rushed towards the elevators and stood next to the man. The lift arrived and the two entered the cabin. The man put his phone in his pocket and said: ‘Which floor?’

‘Fiftieth, Inspector McGallen,’ said Gorsky. ‘Fiftieth.’

McGallen pressed the buttons for the forty-ninth and fiftieth floors. ‘We’ll be downstairs,’

‘Sure,’ said Gorsky. ‘Just don’t forget whose side you’re on.’

XXIX

At the top floor of the One Canada Square building. Gorsky stepped out and on to the marble floor of a lobby. To the right was a welcome desk with elaborate flower arrangements and immediately next to it an emergency exit leading to the internal emergency stairs. To the left of the lift was the cloakroom and straight ahead a milky glass door with Art Nouveau ornaments. Two young ladies greeted the new arrival with a smile, asked for his coat and if he wanted to deposit his belongings.

‘No, I’ll keep my coat on,’ he replied but decided to leave the case. He would keep the rucksack, though.

They asked for his name and when he obliged, they ticked a box on the list. ‘Please come in,’ they said, and one opened the entrance. The sound of a piano came through.

‘Chopin, perhaps, or Schubert or... one of those,’ thought Gorsky.

‘To the right,’ said the girl and pointed at the next glass door. Above it, a golden plate read - the Atrium. Gorsky found himself in a vast room with marble flooring, a high ceiling and glass walls that left the visitor in a state of levitation and awe above the city. He felt like he was standing on Aladdin’s magic carpet. The music came from a concert piano at the opposite end of the Atrium. There was something ethereal about this office that sat in the clouds, overlooking the Thames and half of London’s amenities. The city lay within reach and yet it was stuck behind a thick protective glass.

To the right of the entrance, there was a long red wall that featured some contemporary artwork as well as a large, flat TV screen showing logs burning in a fireplace. In front of the wall, further from the entrance, there was a large aquarium with tropical vegetation and a couple of piranha fish. In the middle of the room stood a massive totem-like phallus mounted on a wooden pedestal.

As he entered, Gorsky heard a tall, elegant gentleman explaining to the party that this sculpture was borrowed from the Phallogological Museum in Reykjavik. It belonged to his good friend and business associate, Dr Sigurdsson.

‘It’s a young blue whale phallus, you see. A grown-up male’s member can reach the length of up to five metres,’ the elegant, learned gentleman informed his listeners.

Beyond the group were a long, glass table and chair, several armchairs and a large couch. The room probably featured hidden cameras and microphones as RM & CEN considered it good business practice to record the proceedings of all meetings and keep an accurate record. Gorsky stood and watched, waiting to be noticed. Under his arm there was a small, red rucksack. In the rucksack, there was a box. Further down the room, at the long table, Ituribe sat next to a young woman, his head buried in paperwork. Beside them there were two other lawyers, one from Garriburton Inc. and one from RM & CEN.

Two waitresses in smart outfits stood in the corner holding trays with drinks and light snacks.

‘Nice to see you, Liz,’ said Tom Deutsch while placing a hand gently on the waist of a young woman talking to Jack Sailgood.

‘Isobel, the name is Isobel,’ she said removing his hand with an expression of distaste on her lips, then turned her back and walked away. At first, Deutsch held his nerve.

‘What the fuck was that?’ he then said as he watched Isobel leave. The ever-so-helpful Jack Sailgood was happy to oblige.

‘It’s the sister, Tom,’ he whispered into the American ear. ‘The sister.’

‘Sister? I didn’t know she had one. They look the same.’

‘Of course, Tom. They are twins.’

‘You kept this secret?’

‘Classified information, yes.’

‘And what happened to Liz?’

‘Tehran happened to Liz. She just helped secure a nuclear deal with Iran. Haven’t you noticed?’

‘I noticed the deal, not her role in it.’

At the other end of the room, behind the totem and closer to the piranhas, Lord Mintbatten was discussing the advantages of owning one's own stable of racehorses with El Guapo Medina who appeared to be a great admirer of the English countryside.

'It is so unlike my native Sonora,' the Mexican complained. 'If only we had some rain back home.'

Milla Ivanovna stood next to the concert piano. She wore a black jacket, trousers and a pearl necklace that she kept touching with her left hand.

Deutsch was interested in obtaining from Medina the names of the United States Senators on the Sinaloa cartel pay list. Since Sinaloa was the competition to Medina's own interests in the Senate, Deutsch figured it a win-win situation. It would strengthen both men's positions in their respective lines of business.

'Ha, ha,' he said. 'For a small fee I can throw in a couple of names of your own, personal foes. Ha, ha, that would be very elegant. Ha, ha, what do you think, ha?'

The Mexican listened to the proposition and exploded in laughter. 'Sure, excellent idea, why not continue this conversation later, in a more private location?'

As Gorsky walked into the room and stood at the entrance, the murmur slowly died out and the heads started turning. Even the touch of the pianist seemed to turn softer as the music paled into the background.

Ituribe stopped writing his notes.

Milla Ivanovna stopped talking to Lord Mintbatten in mid-sentence. The rest of the party followed suit, and everyone turned towards the man with the rucksack.

'My dearest Alex,' squealed Milla Ivanovna and made one step towards Gorsky with her arms wide open. 'We are all so happy to see you.'

'Who is that?' asked Tom Deutsch who was standing next to Medina and Ituribe.

'The Russian guy with the jewel,' explained Medina.

'Gorsky,' said Sailgood. 'The Kaganov security man.'

'Ah, here comes our man,' exclaimed Lord Mintbatten.

'Where is my jewel?' cried Milla Ivanovna who had, by now, reached Gorsky and extended her arms towards the rucksack. Gorsky sidestepped her and approached the long table where he dropped the bag and put a hand on it.

‘The Russian Soul is here,’ he said, took the green box out and placed it on the table. ‘First, you, Milla Ivanovna,’ he said. ‘You owe me something.’

In silence, they all gathered around the table. This was the moment they had waited for, the unveiling of the Russian Soul, the most precious jewel that would open wide the gates of Russia and of Khatanga, the largest diamond mine in the world. Milla Ivanovna clapped and asked a waitress to bring in the ‘parcel’. In the meantime, she stood next to Gorsky looking at the green box. When she tried to reach out for it, Gorsky grabbed her wrist and pushed her hand back. Tom Deutsch forgot about the Isobel episode and managed to win a position on the other flank of the Russian. The moment they had all waited so long for had come. The Russian Soul was the key to the future and that key was there, sitting on the table on the fiftieth floor of a London skyscraper. Next to the table stood Medina, eager to see if his jewel had changed shape, colour, size or substance. He was a great chemistry buff, Medina, specialist in synthetic drugs and heroin production.

On the other side stood Sailgood. Ever so calm and collected, he was aware of at least two endgame scenarios for this little drama. Experience taught him that one could never foresee all the variables and that contingency plans were a sign of sound organisation and wisdom. He didn’t trust anybody and that was his strongest card. His hands were sweaty, and he wiped them on his trousers, making sure no one noticed. Isobel stood next to him. She still remembered her sister’s first e-mail from Tehran: ‘When I get hold of that treacherous son of a bitch...’

‘Is this really the greatest jewel... ever?’ said Mintbatten and walked around the table where he found a place next to Ituribe. The abogado was writing his detailed notes as if they were the exact instructions for getting off Noah’s Ark after the deluge.

‘The jewel is in there?’ asked Tom Deutsch.

Milla Ivanovna darted an unfriendly and potentially lethal look in his direction.

‘Better be,’ she said.

‘I already saw it the other day,’ said Mintbatten to Sailgood.

‘Did you now?’

‘What is it like?’ asked Isobel.

‘Well, if you ask me, it’s an egg. Made of gold and diamonds, though. Yes,’ explained the lord.

‘I found it in Frida Kahlo’s blue house, in the monkey’s cage,’ Medina reminded everyone. ‘I did.’

Gorsky listened, observed, said nothing and glanced at his wristwatch. In fifteen minutes, all the pieces would be deployed on the chessboard. He had a gun. The jewel was on the table, the sword in the cloakroom.

The faces of some of the participants were new to Gorsky but he remembered the Boss’s comments and was able to guess that Jack Sailgood was the stocky one with white hair. Next to him the girl, an MI6 trainee... Then Lord Mintbatten who was so obviously lordly while Tom Deutsch was easy to pick up. He was the American guy who thought he was in charge.

How many guns around this table? Gorsky started counting. All men except Ituribe and Mintbatten. Abogado Ituribe wouldn’t know what to do with one. The lord? What’s wrong with him, anyway? The women are not armed but there is security next door, two, perhaps three men. Security cameras are not visible, but they are on. Microphones...

‘Open that box,’ ordered Deutsch.

‘Oh, here she comes,’ cried Milla Ivanovna as the waitress approached the table. She grabbed the plastic bag out of the girl’s hands. ‘There you are,’ she said passing the bag to Gorsky.

‘The jewel is yours,’ said Gorsky, grabbing the bag and moving away from the table.

Milla Ivanovna laid her hands on the green box. Everybody gathered as close as possible. ‘I want to see this,’ said Isobel, pushing Jack Sailgood slightly.

‘Open that thing,’ he exclaimed while Mintbatten oversaw the proceedings with a sneer. Symbols, jewellery, names. All nonsense, he was more accustomed to counting millions and trusting fat, diversified portfolios.

Ituribe stopped writing his notes and raised an eyebrow.

Milla Ivanovna opened the box and buried her hands in it. She held the jewel with both hands and lifted it.

‘I can feel the power,’ she cried.

‘That’s it?’ said Mintbatten. ‘All this mayhem about this little egg?’

‘Ha, ha,’ chuckled Medina.

‘The Russian Soul,’ said Sailgood.

‘Now we’re talking,’ contributed Deutsch.

‘Is that all gold?’ asked Isobel.

‘The diamond,’ said Milla Ivanovna, pressed the little lever and lifted the upper half of the jewel.

‘yes, let’s see the diamond,’ agreed Medina.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the greatest jewel of all time, the Russian Soul and at its heart the legendary Orlov,’ announced Milla Ivanovna raising the jewel above her head as if she were a priest in a mystical Aztec ceremony where you rip the heart out of the prisoner’s chest to offer it as a gift to the god of thunder.

The Fabergé masterpiece now shone bright in the heart of London.

Isobel sighed. Sailgood, Deutsch and Medina sighed too. Mintbatten and Ituribe stood silent, in awe and relief. It was a magical moment and, sadly enough, those moments are never destined to last.

‘My jewel,’ said Medina pumping his chest. ‘I like it. I might change my mind and keep it, you know?’

‘It’s my present. You, vile creature,’ objected Milla Ivanovna, moving the jewel away from El Guapo. ‘And I’m not giving it back. It’s my present.’

‘I left it with you as a gesture of good will and what did you do with it? You let that diabolical Russian steal it.’

‘I did not let anyone do anything of the sort. That was pure treason and I got it back, didn’t I?’

‘That’s all fine,’ intervened Tom Deutsch. ‘But you are forgetting that I was the one to contact my man in El Paso and give him the task to source the jewel.’

‘Over my dead body, Tom,’ said Jack Sailgood and produced a gun. He then took the jewel out of Milla Ivanovna’s hands. They all went quiet while Sailgood walked around the table and placed the jewel at its very end.

‘What the hell do you think are you doing, Jack?’ cried Deutsch.

‘Did you really think that you and your mates would get away with this mess?’

Everybody stood motionless, taken aback by Sir Jack’s move. Gorsky hadn’t expected such a development. He stepped towards Sailgood who was still talking to Tom Deutsch.

‘Did you really think I was that dumb, Tom?’ said Sailgood. ‘Disappointing, very disappointing, I must say.’

‘Hold on, I think you misunderstood the whole thing,’ said Deutsch.

‘You didn’t expect me to be able to work out the connection between Global Enterprise Investment, Garriburton and the Kremlin? Thanks so much for having faith in your ally’s abilities,’ said Jack Sailgood.

At that point, Mintbatten picked up the remote control and asked for everyone’s attention. ‘If I may, please. We have Mr Hank online,’ he said. ‘He would like to salute you all personally and express his gratitude for all the good work we are doing.’

Mintbatten switched on the TV screen and the image of an old man seated at the desk in an office appeared. His head was cleanly shaven and shiny, his face thin and sickly. He wore a black shirt and spoke with a southern American drawl that seemed to have gone through many incarnations. It was like the accent of someone who had been uprooted at some point in life never to return to their land of origin.

Gorsky took another step and was now within reach of the jewel. He leaned on the table while monitoring as the party gathered in front of the screen.

‘I wish I were in London and engaged more fully in your important work. Unfortunately, I had a transplant scheduled for this morning but I decided to postpone it so I can personally express my gratitude...’

While Mr Hank kept the audience busy with his vision of the future and their respective roles in it, Gorsky noticed a shadow behind the milky glass door. There was an exchange of words with the two attendants. Gorsky observed the shadow approaching the door and pulling it open. A middle-aged man with greyish hair and a week-old beard walked into the room. He strolled across it as though he owned the place.

‘What a charming reunion,’ said the man. ‘I hope no one missed me too much.’

‘Aleksey, finally,’ cried Milla Ivanovna and rushed with her arms wide open to embrace the newcomer.

The rest of the party turned around and followed the scene with vivid interest. None of them had ever met the Boss. Was the man who just walked in the room the mighty Russian oligarch who owned the reaches of Khatanga and was earmarked to become the next President of the Russian Federation? Gorsky knew the answer and he was ready for it.

‘Mr Aleksey Kaganov, I presume?’ said Jack Sailgood still holding the gun.

‘Really?’ added El Guapo.

‘I see,’ contributed Lord Mintbatten.

Tom Deutsch and Isobel said nothing and made a couple of steps with the others towards the newcomer. Ituribe found the whole spectacle entertaining and a faint smile appeared in a corner of his lips. ‘And I thought the Gringos were crazy,’ crossed his mind. ‘Just look at these confused Axolotls.’ He then took his silver snuffbox out of his pocket.

‘Yes, Alexey Kaganov is back from the dead and is very happy to see you all here in this room courtesy of Lord Mintbatten,’ he said. ‘And let me guess, you must be Jack Sailgood, Sir Jack, and you are Tom Deutsch of Garriburton Global. Who else do we have... Mr Medina, of course and...’

‘Isobel, Isobel I work with Sir Jack.’

‘Pleasure,’ said the Boss.

‘That is Mr Ituribe,’ said Milla Ivanovna and pointed at the man in striped suit with an unusual expression on his face. He was seated at the table and quickly put the snuffbox back into his pocket. ‘Mr Medina’s trusted aide.’

‘And, to complete this beautiful family portrait here is our very own Alex Gorsky who, as I am informed, retrieved the Russian Soul for us and saved it from an uncertain and possibly tragic fate,’ said the Boss.

‘And who was the man incinerated in the car? The one wearing your wedding ring?’ said Gorsky.

‘Ha, ha, you have always been too soft, Alex. A true Slavic soul, always thinking about the abstract and neglecting the practical aspects of life.’

‘Why did you have Zakhar killed?’ said Gorsky.

Kaganov looked at Gorsky and, obviously displeased by the question, turned to the rest of the party.

‘I never had the pleasure to meet some of you personally and I humbly apologise for this grave omission. Entirely my fault. As some of you already know and others have guessed, I am Alexey Dmitrovich Kaganov and despite some recent controversies about my whereabouts, I can assure you that I am here and that I am ready to bring our plans to fruition. Before we proceed though, I must clarify a subtle point for I don’t want any speculations to

get in the way of our business relationship. Some time ago, I received the information that a prominent and somewhat hostile organisation was planning to replace me as CEO of my company, as well as the Gubernator of Khatanga.'

Jack Sailgood and Tom Deutsch listened attentively. There were many versions of the events of the past week floating around. What was the official Kaganov version? Milla Ivanovna stood a couple of steps away from the Boss, scanning the faces around for possible reactions. She kept an eye on everyone except Gorsky. After all, he was one of them, a foot soldier in the Kaganov team. What could he possibly know about global affairs, corporate interests and international business? She smiled. She beamed. She had the power. She had the jewel and with the jewel came more power, limitless power.

'So, Vatajev was earmarked to replace you?' said Gorsky and everybody turned their heads to him.

'Vatajev was a traitor,' said Kaganov. 'I did not order his murder, but I was not disappointed to hear about it.'

'You were not disappointed, so you decided to vanish from the scene. Who were you afraid of? Is that why you ordered the murder of Mark Hodayev too?'

'Hodayev? Who is Hodayev?' said the Boss. 'Ah, the FSB agent who solicited our collaboration to get hold of the Russian Soul. He was good, you know. He figured nearly everything out and had to be stopped, for the greater good of course. We don't want Russian agents roaming freely in London, do we? Well, Alex, I can only say that I am very glad and proud that you decided to do the right thing and return the jewel to its right owner, the future President of Russia – myself, of course. What an elegant and symbolic gesture. Give to the Tsar what belongs to the Tsar, didn't your grandfathers use to say so, Alex, didn't they? You see, not much has changed. Instead of the Tsar we have a President. Ha, ha... You have no idea how funny all you people are with your little ideas and fears.'

'I know the man who killed Hodayev. He is on your pay list, Boss,' said Gorsky.

'You read too many, what do they call them... Thrillers, yes, crime fiction,' said the Boss and a few people laughed. 'We are businesspeople, that's all. Aren't we, Mr Sailgood, Mr Deutsch, Mr Medina, Lord Mintbatten? Gentlemen, we have some important business here waiting for us, don't we?'

'And you also tried to kill me by blowing my apartment up,' said Gorsky.

‘This is what I call fun,’ said Medina with a grin. ‘People accusing each other, insults flying... I thought only we in Mexico had that sort of fun. Thought it was part of our... folklore. Shame no one is armed, though. That element is missing, not quite the same...’

Isobel followed the exchange with great interest. There was also the small matter of the body found in the sports bag in the bathroom of a Pimlico flat. Her Majesty’s intelligence services were unhappy about this episode and no amount of hush-hush would do.

Jack Sailgood and Tom Deutsch exchanged a couple of nervous glances. They both looked worried.

‘Shall we take our seats and start the proceedings then?’ said Kaganov and made a wide gesture towards the table that Ituribe had transformed into his office and drug store at the same time. Milla Ivanovna approached Gorsky with the obvious intention of kicking him out. The jewel sat on the table. Kaganov was in charge and questions were superfluous. The stakes were sky-high.

‘Just a second, Mr Kaganov,’ said Lord Mintbatten. ‘We have Mr Hank online. He will be pleased to see that you are alive and well.’

The party moved away from the table and gathered in front of the large screen. The man in the picture had a long and wrinkled face. He had followed the discussion patiently through the live feed and possibly found it entertaining. Mr Hank was a man of principles, the most important of which was to gather and store all information.

‘Mr Hank,’ said Kaganov shouting across the room. ‘Nice to have you here with us. As you see, thanks to you, everything is ready for the next phase of our operation.’

‘Who’s this guy?’ Medina whispered in Milla Ivanovna’s ear.

‘The mastermind,’ she said.

‘I see,’ said Medina not without admiration.

‘Mr Kaganov,’ said Mr Hank calmly. ‘I must confess that for a moment I was worried.’

‘Ha, ha, no need to worry, Mr Hank,’ said Tom Deutsch and all heads turned to him. ‘The jewel is finally and firmly in our possession and we can proceed.’

‘Is that so, Tom?’ muttered Sailgood barely audibly to his colleague and business partner. ‘I thought this was the final phase of our little Russian operation. But of course, you have another deal going on here, right?’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ hissed Deutsch.

‘I’m talking about the deal that supersedes the diamond deal. I’m talking about the deal that you and your pals from the dark side of the moon have cooked up to privatise the natural resources of Siberia inclusive of water and air. That’s what I’m talking about.’

‘Are we talking subtle ethical points here or...?’

‘I don’t give a flying fuck about your ethical points. I’m telling you that the deal is off.’

‘Is it you or is the whole family like that?’

Sailgood grabbed Deutsch by the arm. ‘You’re a swine, you know?’

‘Well, buddy...’ began Deutsch but was interrupted.

‘Sure, whatever,’ interrupted Medina. ‘I appreciate this heart-breaking and tear-jerking spectacle, but the jewel is mine and will stay so until I see money coming out of the washing machine nice and clean, *comprende?* Lots of money. I want to build a couple of skyscrapers like this one in Sonora.

The party seemed to forget about Mr Hank and moved back towards the table and the jewel. Ituribe was surprised to see the crowd advancing. Gorsky stood his ground next to the jewel. The Boss approached it and picked it up. There was a glassy shine in his eyes when he raised the green box above his head.

‘I am the heir to the Romanov throne,’ he cried. ‘And I have an appointment with destiny.’

Isobel was about to say something to Sir Jack, when he turned to Tom Deutsch and she overheard the exchange they had about the Siberian resources.

‘Liz was right,’ crossed her mind. ‘For Christ’s sake, she was right. Jack and Tom are running a racket on their own behind the façades of state-sponsored intelligence services. That’s what all your talk about privatisation is about. It’s about the ultimate expropriation of natural resources. That’s their business model and...’

‘That’s right, Boss,’ said Gorsky, interrupting Kaganov’s long-awaited moment. He held the Sig-Sauer in one hand and with the other he pointed at the jewel. ‘Now put that back on the table, please.’

‘How did he get in with a gun?’ cried lord Mintbatten.

‘He is our security officer,’ explained Milla Ivanovna who suddenly felt short of breath.

Kaganov put the box back on the table. The gun was aimed at his guts and he was a reasonable man.

‘Move away,’ said Gorsky and made a gesture for everyone to retreat from the table. Ituribe too.

‘Miss...’ he said nodding at the young woman.

‘Isobel ...’

‘What’s the time, Isobel?’

‘It’s,’ and she looked at her wristwatch, ‘Half past twelve.’

‘Good, your friend, Mr McGallen of Scotland Yard will be here any time now. I am sure you will have lots of explaining to do.’

‘You cannot do that,’ cried Jack Sailgood and stamped his foot on the floor. ‘I’ll contact my office and...’

‘Put the phone down,’ said Gorsky aiming the gun at Sir Jack who returned the phone to his pocket.

‘Wait a minute, young man,’ said the dark man from the screen. ‘What do you think this is? A Boy Scout’s party? Put that jewel back on the table and you better apologise to these fine people.’

Gorsky raised the aim of the gun straight towards the screen and Mr Hank.

‘Don’t be silly, boy,’ the man said. ‘We are in charge and there’s nothing you can do about it.’

‘I don’t know you,’ said Gorsky aiming at Mr Hank. ‘But from the little I saw and heard from you, I decided not to like you.’

Gorsky fired the gun straight into the screen and ended Mr Hank’s virtual presence. Moments later, as no new shots were fired, everyone raised their heads from behind the pieces of furniture while checking their faces and hands for possible cuts or wounds. The door suddenly opened, and inspector McGallen walked in the room in the company of four policeman.

‘I believe you are involved in a string of murders as well as illicit financial activities,’ said McGallen. ‘You are all under arrest.’

‘What do you mean, under arrest,’ said Jack Sailgood. ‘I am...’

‘I know exactly who you are and I know about your diamond Mozambique business too.’

‘I’m an American citizen,’ declared Tom Deutsch.

‘That doesn’t exempt you from UK law,’ McGallen was quick to reassure him.

‘On my own premises?’ Lord Mintbatten was perplexed. ‘I want to call my lawyer.’

‘Of all the bastards around the world that I could do business with I managed to find this bunch of useless amateurs...’ complained Medina bitterly. Ituribe nodded.

‘Alexey,’ said Milla Ivanovna. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Mr Superintendent, you are making a huge mistake,’ said Kaganov approaching the policeman. ‘Please check with your superiors, contact the Foreign Office before...’

While this scene was taking place somewhere between the phallic totem and the piranha aquarium, Gorsky used the opportunity to put his gun back into the holster, collect the green box with the jewel and walk straight towards the milky door. When he passed next to McGallen they exchanged glances, something that didn’t escape the attention of the Boss.

‘You, dirty little traitor...’ he yelled at Gorsky, ‘I saved you from your stinky Siberian hole and this is how you repay me, by betraying the whole country and me - even me!’

He howled and fell in the embrace of Milla Ivanovna who felt a strong urge to kick him out of the window.

Gorsky walked out of the room and collected his silver box from the cloakroom. He walked past the elevator and opened the door to the stairway.

‘The lift,’ cried the two girls, ‘it’s here.’

‘No, thanks, I’ll take the stairs,’ he said, exiting the lobby and taking the stairs up. In a couple of long strides, he reached the flat roof of the building and the helipad platform. There was one man standing next to the chopper and another one seated in the pilot’s seat. The man next to the aircraft was mid-height, overweight and bald. As Gorsky stepped onto the platform, the man turned around holding a gun.

‘Good day, Vargas,’ said Gorsky.

‘I didn’t expect to see you here.’ Vargas lowered his gun. ‘Where is the Boss? I thought he would come on his own.’

Gorsky put the silver case and the jewel down on the green tarmac.

‘He sent me instead,’ said Gorsky. ‘He sent me to deliver his expressions of deepest gratitude for murdering Vatayev, Sergey and Mark Hodayev. With a bit of luck, he said, you should be able get rid of me too.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Vargas.

‘And of course, I forgot to mention those people killed in the car accident in Scotland.’

‘I obey orders, Alex,’ cried Vargas. ‘Same as you.’

‘Oh, no, Vargas, no. Not same as me.’

At that very moment, Vargas raised his hand and fired a shot at Gorsky who managed to throw himself to the ground and land at Vargas’ feet. Before his adversary realised, Gorsky was up to his feet and headbutted Vargas straight on the nose, then placed his right leg behind the man's left and pushed him down. As Vargas lay with a bloody face on the ground, Gorsky picked up his firearm. The pilot in the chopper sat immobile, as if frozen and Gorsky assessed him as of no risk. As he picked up his case and box and threw them on the back seat of the chopper, Gorsky noticed a strange expression on the Indian’s face. He turned around, moved sideways and pulled the Sig-Sauer out just in time as he heard a bullet impacting the haulage. Vargas was up on one knee and aiming again. He didn’t have enough time though, as Gorsky’s bullet hit him straight in the left side of the chest. He fell on his back and stayed prostrate.

With a couple of quick steps, Gorsky approached the body. Vargas had a gun in his hand and blood on his chest. His eyes were glassy. He was gone for good.

‘Never keep family photographs on display in public places,’ said Gorsky. For that was where he had seen Mark Hodayev’s killer, in one of the photographs that Vargas kept on the wall of his Bella Patria office. Gorsky decided to leave the gun in the dead man’s hand. It would look tidier in the eyes of McGallen and his associates.

He jumped onto the front seat of the chopper and said: ‘City Airport.’

The pilot nodded and in a matter of seconds they were airborne. He was more than happy to listen carefully to the man with the gun. As the chopper flew from the rooftop of the skyscraper, a blast shook the air and the chopper shuddered. Gorsky looked down and all he could see was a cloud of smoke coming from the Canada Square and people running in all directions. As the pilot directed the chopper away from the skyscraper and towards City Airport, the wind blew the smoke away and Gorsky could tell the location of the explosion. It was just in front of the stage. There seemed to be charred bodies on the ground and people running in panic.

XXX

The city was covered in snow and the waters of the harbour undulated under the weight of heavy, winter clouds. The green dome of Uspenski Cathedral dominated the small Helsinki harbour peninsula. Standing on the cathedral steps, Gorsky watched a sailing yacht passing between two nearby islands. To the left, he saw the city roofs and somewhere in the distance the polar horizon that dwindled and merged with the frozen forest.

Behind the cathedral lay the Russian cemetery in the middle of which stood a small church with an onion-shaped dome. The church was light blue, in gentle contrast with the tall, leafless birches and the slim, dark pine trees. Gorsky walked from the chapel down a narrow path in the snow. He carried the green box and long case using them to keep his balance as though he were walking on a plank. The only other people he saw were an elderly couple busying themselves around a grave. They brought flowers, took the old ones from the vase and cleaned the headstone with small brooms and wipes.

It took Gorsky more than half an hour to find the stocky, black marble tombstone with an egg-shaped ornament on top. He kneeled and made the sign of the cross. With his bare hands, he brushed the snowflakes from the golden lettering. It read Fabergé on top and below were listed the names of Agathon, Maria, Oleg and Liisa. There it was, the grave of Agathon Fabergé, the last of the creators of the greatest jewel the world has ever known, the Russian Soul.

He extracted a knife out of the inner pocket of his coat and dug a little hole in the frozen ground. Gradually, he made the hole larger and deeper. It took some time to penetrate the soil and reach the lid of the tomb itself. Once he did, he inserted the edge of the knife between the lid and the wall. He made sure the knife could slide left and right and then applied pressure; too much, for the blade snapped in half.

‘Safari gear store,’ mumbled Gorsky exasperated. ‘This steel wasn’t made for polar temperatures, that’s for sure.’

Unsure how to proceed with his plan he sat in the snow. After few seconds, he spotted his long, silver case that sat on a snowdrift. Picking up the case up he took the sword out of it.

‘Sorry, Caravaggio,’ he said and continued to work on the lid with the long blade of the Renaissance sword. After a while he managed to gain access to the interior of the tomb. He could make out the coffins and little more in the complete darkness of the grave. The opening was wide enough, he concluded, and picked up the box with the jewel. He opened it and checked the diamond. It was all there. The Russian Soul was the same egg-shaped jewel that Nicolay II Romanov gave as a present to his wife Alexandra. Gorsky placed the top back, locked it and then closed the box. The gap in the tomb was wide enough and through it he lowered the box into the grave. He took his Sig-Sauer out of the holder and placed it next to the box. He then moved the marble lid back on and placed the soil on top of it. In his cupped hands, he brought some snow from the surrounding area to make the disruption look minimal. No one would have guessed that the tomb had been tampered with. Happy with his work, he cleaned the sword and put it back into the case.

He took the path in the snow towards the church and then on to the cathedral. Inside he bought two candles. He went to the little sand pit where a couple of candles were already burning, and lit his first candle, pushed it into the sand and made the sign of the cross.

‘Agathon, you can rest in peace now,’ he said. ‘Your art will bring no more misery and death.’

Then he lit a second candle and placed it in the pit, making sure it wouldn’t fall. He made the sign of the cross.

‘For Mark, the Mark of old.’

XXXI

Gorsky walked through the automatic gate of the Helsinki airport terminal where he found himself in a brewing sea of people and a cacophony of sound.

He had lost his phone during the Vargas episode and he had no contact with Senka and the Fravashis. After a couple of minutes, he found a phone booth and dialled the only mobile number he knew by heart, Kathy's. There was no reply. He then managed to find the Internet access room. There had been a blast in that park, right in front of the stage where the group had gathered. Steve the drummer was right. He smelt the rat but couldn't stop it. Gorsky sat in front of one of the computers and logged on to the BBC news website with a report on the London terrorist attack. That's what they called it - the London Terrorist Attack. Muslim elements radicalised in the UK, international links and sleeping cells... The attack triggered many other attacks on mosques, Muslim people and property around the country.

In the video, a woman who was escorting her daughter to an evening class said, 'We breathe fear.' She spoke with a London accent, wore a hijab and gesticulated frantically.

Gorsky stopped reading and leaned back in the chair. Nick was not a Muslim fundamentalist. Nick was an inside operative, he was one of us. The terrorist attack was designed to cast blame on the jihadis, the extremists, the Muslims, the whole lot. This was the usual pretext needed for more war. Gorsky had seen this kind of pretext before, the crude maths of adding and subtracting human lives – the minute pieces on the great, global chessboard. Senka Golovkin would cherish such a chess challenge. Just feed him some data and leave enough breathing space. You could solve lots of pressing problems by deploying that simple method. If no physical activity or danger were involved, Senka was your man.

Gorsky tried to Skype Kathy but there was no reply. He then opened a new Gmail account and sent e-mails to both Senka and Kathy asking Senka about the explosion and telling Kathy to reply to the mail and pick up the bloody phone. She is switched on and she knows what to do. She had seen the news and connected the blast, the arrests made at the World Trade

Forum and his disappearance. The Boss's face was all over the front pages. Kathy was a clever girl, no need for detailed explanations.

'By the time the agencies work out where the mails were sent from, I'll be gone,' he thought. 'Sending my name to the Finns won't help either. The Boss wasn't stupid, the multiple name and passport policy is a sound operating principle, very sound.'

The next news item seemed to be from a kind of political gathering. There was an old man giving a fiery speech and the crowd waving thousands of green, white and red flags as well as other symbols. The man was pumping his chest and waving his fists. The subtitles ran fast at the bottom of the screen... 'The leader of the Italian Padania, Fazio Bombardelli, spoke against immigration from northern Africa and the south of Italy and asserted the historical duty of the leadership of his party to free Northern Italy from the shackles of the tragic Unitarian ideology. He went on to mention the example of the great Padanian artist, Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio, who is a shining symbol of the spirit, and works that should be reclaimed from the vile, centralist Roman claws.'

'Give me Caravaggio's sword,' the madman shouted, 'And I'll cut our way through the perennial poisonous weed to a prosperous and dignified future.' The crowd cheered and waved huge flags. The politician waved back and smiled his artificial, Hollywood smile.

'After all, Italy might not be the right destination for me,' thought Gorsky, squeezing the handle of his case and walking away from the computer station.

While he was considering his options and possible destinations, he passed by a cowboy themed bar featuring a five-piece live band. The girl on stage was dressed as a cowgirl with proper boots and hat. She was singing a country music standard that Gorsky found familiar but couldn't pick up the words.

'It sounds like a different language, but not Finnish.'

He then spotted the large poster advertising the session. These were the Helsinki Cowboys. Then, there were the names of places, dates and hours and the explanation that their repertoire was made of traditional American folk songs sung in Latin.

'In Latin,' mumbled Gorsky and walked away. 'In Latin?'

A couple of minutes later he bought a ticket to Rio de Janeiro and went to the counter to check in and drop off his case. He took his place in the queue behind an oriental looking gentleman who wore a tailor-made coat and wide brimmed hat. The man carried a silver case.

He approached the counter and placed the case, his only piece of luggage, on the conveyor belt.

‘It’s a precious item,’ Gorsky heard the man say. ‘A Japanese sword.’

The man checked in and turned to leave. He saw Gorsky but never blinked, just walked away.

‘Strange,’ crossed Gorsky's mind. ‘This is the man from the antiquarian shop in Rome. He recognised me, I’m sure.’

XXXII

An hour later, Gorsky sat in the middle of the Airbus aircraft en route to Madrid. As always, he had asked for an aisle seat. He needed more legroom and he liked to monitor the cabin. It was an old and useful habit. A flight attendant asked him to place his luggage in the compartment. He didn't have any luggage. The attendant then asked if he wanted to take off his coat.

'The cabin is warm,' she said. 'And you won't need it in Madrid.'

'My destination is Rio,' he replied. 'I'll rather wait till Rio to take my coat off.'

Gorsky didn't know anybody in Rio. He didn't know much about Rio full stop. He had never been to South America and that was probably the only reason for choosing it as a destination.

He finished the conversation with the attendant as the last passengers were boarding the plane and finding their seats. Gorsky spotted the Chinese gentleman coming up the corridor. He had taken his coat and hat off and was carrying them in one hand. He stopped before reaching Gorsky and checked the row and seat numbers. He placed his coat and hat in the luggage compartment and, as he was taking his aisle seat on the other side of the aisle from Gorsky, a woman with a small child passing down the aisle dropped a milk bottle. When he was halfway to the ground, the man grabbed it. Quick reflex, a light move, and Gorsky saw it. The man smiled, handing the bottle back and took his seat.

'He knows I'm here, three rows behind him,' thought Gorsky and found the idea entertaining.

The plane took off and after a while the crew served dinner and then coffee. It was then, one and a half hours into the flight, that Gorsky noticed some strange commotion. At first, nothing happened. It was one of those situations where silence is the best indicator that something was happening. The Chinese guy was browsing a flight magazine without reading it. That much was clear. Somewhere behind, a child cried. Some passengers turned on the lights

above their heads and began reading. Others had tablet computers and laptops, kids played with smart phones... All sorts of gadgets appeared on display.

Suddenly, two men in dark blue overalls appeared in front of the pilot's cabin door. They wore keffiyehs on their heads and held guns. Two more in identical outfits appeared in front of the rear cabin crew area.

As a passenger screamed, the four men began shouting instructions. A male attendant who stood in front of the pilot's cabin waved his hand and was struck forcefully on the head by one of the terrorists. An axe appeared in the hands of the other terrorist and he started hitting the pilot cabin's door.

A wave of shouts and screams suddenly inundated the passenger cabin. No-one moved, though. People sat in their seats. Some crying, the brave shouting, the not so brave screaming.

'Glock 17s, standard issue,' observed Gorsky, 'seventeen rounds each. If they start firing, they will turn this plane into Swiss cheese. We would plummet in a matter of a minutes.'

One of the armed men picked up the microphone. He yelled for everyone's attention and then said: 'We are the commando unit of the Holy Caliphate Army. We have taken control of this aircraft. Remain seated and calm and you'll be safe. The captain and the crew will comply with our requests and so will you.'

Gorsky recognised the accent – British. Midlands, probably.

'We are redirecting this flight to the Holy city of Idlib,' the man continued, 'We'll land in three hours.'

The plane was being hijacked by people claiming to be soldiers of the Great Caliphate. Gorsky was aware of the procedure. Once in the hands of the local warlords, the lives of the passengers would become a commodity. They would be exchanged or killed. The crew was locked away. The captain probably had a gun pointed at his head or a bomb placed under his seat. Half of the passengers on board were screaming and the other half were trying to calm the first half down by shouting. One of the terrorists came down the aisle with a sack collecting the electronic devices. He stood next to Gorsky and shouted something in Arabic.

'No problem, no problem,' said Gorsky and dropped his broken mobile phone into the sack.

He then saw the Chinaman taking his smart phone out of his pocket and dropping it into the sack. The collector pushed the man and shouted. The Chinaman remained composed,

nodded politely and responded by saying that he didn't have any other devices. As the collector continued moving down the aisle, the man turned towards Gorsky. Their eyes met and they nodded to each other. The collector continued to gather phones and gadgets. Two armed men stood in front of the cockpit. Two other men stood at the other end of the plane that continued to fly over Germany en route to Damascus. The Chinaman leaned back into his seat and closed his eyes. Gorsky put his hands into the pockets of his big grey coat. He extended his arms and closed his eyes. There were one hundred and fifty people on board the plane – five terrorists that he could see and probably another two among the passengers - three more hours before they landed in Syria. He pushed his hands even deeper into the pockets and tried to stretch his legs but there was not enough legroom.

'Bummer,' he mumbled, annoyed, as if this was the most serious of his problems. A middle-aged lady in the seat next to him started shivering and the man on her left was trying to comfort her. They were going on their honeymoon somewhere exotic.

'Finns,' thought Gorsky and smirked. 'This is his third and her second marriage, probably. Children grew up and left home. They are looking forward to a sunny destination, so they won't mind the Middle-East that much.'

Gorsky recognised this state of mind and body. The heartbeat, the adrenalin, the calm, collected mind at work. He felt alive. He felt the wind of the Caucasus on his cheeks. Once more he heard the battle cries and recognised the smell.

Thirty-three thousand feet above Germany, in a plane bound for Syria, Gorsky knew the answers. Living a quiet, suburban life was a dream, an illusion and this is what was left of it now.. Just another war zone.

- END -