

The Defection

The man, an American with a thick bushy moustache still containing the remnants of his last meal, dropped his heavy boots onto the ground, the snow scrunching under them. His teeth chattered with the relentless cold and the tighter he clasped his jaw shut the more it seemed to grind in protest. He lifted his head slowly, tired, bloodshot eyes watering as the icy cold air bit into them. He shuddered, shaking a fresh layer of snow from his shoulders. He knew he should be used to the vile weather but he wondered whether a sane person ever really could get used to winters which spread throughout all the months of the year like a desperate weed wrapping itself around and squeezing the life out of everything it came into contact with.

The tall, thin man opposite him leaned against the railing which snaked around the park, watching the American with obvious distrust and intense fear. He gave a low, forced laugh, throwing his head back nervously, a bony Adam's apple bouncing excitedly in his throat. 'Cold, comrade?' He asked with a Russian accent as thick as fog.

The American did not answer, instead stepping backwards in the snow and staring vacantly towards the frozen river in front of them, the arcs still present from ice-skaters earlier in the day. The river sliced through the landscape, separating the snow tinged greenery of the park from the dull uniform brick houses and buildings on the other side. He could not shake the feeling the cold was burrowing into his bones and eating away at him.

The American had been journeying to Russia for what seemed like decades, but in reality it had only been a few years. He had taken the job because his superior had told him it was a sure-fire way to get a promotion, the cushy desk job in Langley he dreamed of, where he could finally be the one giving the orders and sending other saps behind enemy lines. He was tired of being the sap himself, and was certainly getting too old for it. The politics were one thing, he thought, he could deal with the daily minutia of paranoia and fear because it was, after all, part of the job, but the weather was an entirely different matter. He smiled, his trainer had warned him, *the coldest part of the Cold War is the cold*, and he thought now, as he could feel his organs freezing inside of him, that never a truer word had been spoken. He yearned for the warmth of his native Texas sun on his face, his hand wrapped around a cold beer dripping with droplets of cool water which would trickle down his warm fingers. It seemed to him in Russia the only drink available was vodka so strong you could feel it tearing strips off your liver.

The Russian lifted his head nervously. 'You have the documents?' His tongue darted across pale, dry lips. He smacked his mouth, forcing moisture into a dry throat. The Comrade knew for certain there was nothing casual about it. He could smell the fear, the desperation from where he stood. The scent of a man who knew his life was close to extinction was as palpable to him as cologne.

The American reached inside his fur jacket, pulling out a stainless steel hip flask. The Russian stared at it open mouthed, his eyes widening in abject horror at what appeared to be a bullet shaped dent in the flask.

The American noticed his reaction and lifted the flask. 'This little beauty saved my life,' he said with pride, 'stopped a bullet from the German Secret Police.'

He took a long slug of whisky from the flask, slapping his lips in satisfaction. He offered the flask to the Russian. He shook his head. 'I have your papers,' the American said. 'And you, do you have the information we require?'

'Dah,' the Russian replied. He reached into his coat and extracted a folder. He raised it to his mouth, his chapped lips pressing pensively against it. He studied the American with a burning intensity as if his life depended upon it, 'you know what we have here, right?'

The American man shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. As far as he was aware, *as far as he had been told*, this mission was no different to the others. Retrieve the information, extract the asset and get them all back to Washington safely and securely.

‘I don’t know, and I don’t care. My job is to get you and your brain out of Russia, nothing more, Anton.’

The Russian lowered his head and whispered something in Russian which the American did not understand. He had seen it many times before, the fear and despair of someone who knows their life is hanging in the balance. As far as he could tell, the Russian was just another defector, running to a better life. As far as he knew there was nothing startling about Anton Veckenov. A mid-level Government employee working in the scientific industry who had probably grown tired of being paid little and treated badly.

The Russian lifted his head. ‘Don’t say my name again. As far as anyone is concerned Anton Veckenov is dead.’

The American sighed and glanced at his watch. It was already close to midnight and he had to get to the safe-house to begin transmitting the documents before one a.m. if he was to stand any chance of getting out of the country by morning.

‘Before you know it, you’ll have that new life in the States you’ve been dreaming of for you and your family, with fresh new identities and names like Josh and Tiffany,’ the American added with a wink.

Anton Veckenov blinked several times, his throat tightening, a vein bulging in it. ‘I hope so,’ he whispered.

The American clapped his hands. ‘I look forward to meeting your lovely wife Lena in the flesh. We’ll have to invite you over for a good old traditional American BBQ, you’ll love it. Steak as big as your head, I bet you’ve never seen such a thing, have you, after queuing up in stores and being doled out your basic rations?’

‘I hope so,’ Anton repeated again, uncertainty creeping through his voice like a vine.

The American slapped his back. ‘There you go, now give me the file and tell me what you know before we catch goddamn pneumonia in this shit-hole and then before you know it you’ll be on a nice safe cargo plane winging it’s way to the good ol’ US of A.’

Anton gave him a doubtful look. ‘If I give you the file, what’s to say you won’t just kill me?’

The American shrugged. ‘I could give you my word, but hell, who knows what that’s worth?’ He snorted, his wide mouth stretching into a grin. ‘Listen, I’ll level with you, its common practice, that’s all. I need to verify the documents you are selling are real.’ He shrugged again, ‘and then the plane is waiting for you and the lovely Lena, to start your new life.’

Anton did not answer. He turned away, rolling his head slowly as if considering his options. With a shaking hand, he offered the file. The American snatched it from him, flicking it open. His eyes narrowing as he tried to decipher the Russian language. He tutted. ‘What is this?’

Anton looked at the folder, his body slumping as he did so. ‘My life’s work,’ he said finally.

The American nodded. ‘Ah, I see. Selling it on to the highest bidder, eh, my friend?’

Anton’s nostrils flared, his face tightening. ‘You think this is about money?’

The American shrugged as if to say. *What else is there?*

He studied the Russian’s face and saw something else. What was it? Anger? ‘What did they do to you?’ He asked after a moment.

Anton turned his head. ‘You think you know all about me from reading a piece of paper in an intelligence file? That I have two,’ he stopped, muttering something inaudible under his breath, ‘nyet one child. Life is not so black and white as you read, my friend. I have, *I had*, a daughter, Gina.’

'Had?' The American asked.

Anton looked off into the distance. 'It was a hit and run, a drunk driver ploughed into two cars, one of them my daughter's. He killed everyone in his path.'

'I'm very sorry,' the American replied whilst thinking, *what does this have to do with anything?*

'It broke our hearts seeing our little girl lying in a hospital bed, being kept alive by machines. She was just thirty years old with her whole life ahead of her, yet to have a family of her own. The doctors said there was no hope.' He stopped, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. 'Seeing my wife by her side, her hands wrapped so tightly around her rosary it made her fingers bleed, it was more than I could bare. Igor, my son, was consumed by guilt. He's a strong man, a policeman so he has to be, but he never came to the hospital, not once, instead he devoted himself to finding the man who did that to our poor Gina. But he never found him, the man disappeared like he was a wisp of smoke.' The Russian blew his nose and wiped his gloves across the rim of his damp eyes.

'I'm very sorry,' the American repeated with as much conviction as he could find in the recesses of his cold, empty, heart. 'Forgive me, but what does this have to do with your defection?'

'Because,' Anton spat. He stabbed his finger towards the folder. 'They did all of this for what you're holding in your hands. I've spent most of my life working on it, those lines which probably look like gibberish to you, but in reality hold secrets you could barely imagine.'

The American gave him a surprised look. 'They killed your daughter for this information?'

Anton lifted his head. The American thought he had never seen such sadness in a person's eyes, and he had spent most of his life staring into the abyss of other people's misery.

'No, they did something worse,' Anton answered. 'They made me kill her.'

The American's eyes widened in surprise. He was not sure what he had been expecting, but it had not been this. 'I don't understand,' he said finally.

Anton tapped the folder. 'All because of my work. They believed it was worth killing for.'

'And is it?'

Anton snorted. 'Ironically, the reason everyone wants it is because they believe it holds the secret to eternal life.'

The American stifled a laugh. 'What are you talking about? Immortality?' He added with a smirk.

'Immortality.' Anton answered simply.

Anton nodded. 'Is it such a preposterous idea, comrade?'

The American regarded him with suspicion. 'Well, yeah it is, Anton. Preposterous and impossible. Hell, I have a soft spot for my old Aunt Ethel and I like to see her on the holidays but she's an old coot who does nothing but grumble and piss into the bag tied to her waist,' the American said with a chortle. 'I can stand a weekend of it, but an eternity?' He shook his head vigorously. 'No thanks, I'll shed a tear at her wake and raise a glass to her memory and that'll be that, and frankly it's how it should be. For all of us.'

Anton continued. 'Ah, there you go, the cruelty of time and the ravages of disease. Aunt Ethel is probably still as sharp as a tack in here,' he added tapping his skull. 'What if the body is just a host for the brain and when we use it up we just move on to the next one?'

The American frowned again. 'I don't get it. What are you saying?'

Anton moved closer to him. 'I was working with another scientist, the pair of us were the two pieces coming together to make the whole. He is, *was*, a brilliant scientist, devoting his life to understanding the human brain and how to utilise it. For decades surgeons have been saving people's lives by giving them new organs when their own fail them. But there is only so much you can do. For years my colleague and I have been working on a way to perform brain transplants, a way to move the essence of a person from their dying body to a new, healthier one.'

The American gave him a sceptical look. 'Well, I could see why people might be interested in that, but still...'

'We began by experimenting on animals and had obtained some interesting results, but nothing which inspired us to move onto experimenting with human beings.'

The American sucked air into his lungs. So they gave you some motivation. *Use your knowledge to save your daughter.* 'Your daughter,' he said softly.

Anton's head turned slowly, tears brimming on his eye lids. He nodded.

'What persuaded you to do it?' The American asked.

'They lied,' Anton replied. He waved his hand dismissively. 'Oh it doesn't matter now how they did it. The fact is they used the blindness of my grief, I was a fool, but I so desperately wanted to believe Gina was still alive, despite what the evidence told me. I HAD to believe and swallowed the line they fed me, like some damn orfe fish in the Moskva River. They did all this for something we know doesn't even work and they did so because they thought they could use it as a weapon which meant they had to have it before anyone else.'

The American frowned. 'A weapon?'

'We were working on this because we believed it would end suffering, but of course, it could have other implications. With this knowledge governments could choose who dies and who lives forever thus creating a superior race. This is not about war, or genocide. With this knowledge, they don't need to kill, they just choose who to save and who to let die, creating their perfect people, their perfect world.'

They lapsed into silence. 'Yet, here we are,' the American said. 'And you're about to defect and spill your guts to us Yanks, why? The chances are we'll do exactly the same as the Ruskies would have done.'

'Because,' Anton spat, 'my country betrayed me. They killed my daughter for my work. And I won't let them have it, but I know they'll kill me too if I don't give it to them. My partner has already gone missing, for all I know he's told them everything and he's already dead. I can't take the chance of them getting me, because my formula is what they need to make the experiment work. This is not about the money or protection your country can give me, it's about not giving them what they want. It's all I can do to make them pay for what they did to me.'

A silence descended between them again, as thick as the night air. Anton reached over and took the American's hip flask and took a tentative sip, the veins in his neck flexing as the whisky hit the back of his throat.

The American tilted his head and shrugged. It was really none of his concern. If Langley thought what this man was selling was worth it, it was none of his business. 'Okay buddy, let's get out of here.'

Anton nodded. 'Dah.' He stepped towards the American, stopping suddenly, altered by a loud WHOOSH echoing through the still night air. He frowned, a puzzled expression appearing on his face. He lifted his head towards the sky as if searching for a bird.

'Why do I suddenly feel warm?' He asked the American with a puzzled frown. The words came out of his mouth in sharp bursts before his body crumbled into a heap on the ground.

The American stumbled towards him, his eyes wide as they flicked over Anton's writhing body. They narrowed as a dark circle appeared on Anton's coat. It grew quickly. Anton's head turned slowly down and he touched the circle. 'It's wet,' he mumbled in confusion, a moment later his head lolled to the side. The American pulled Anton's body to the wall, all the time his eyes darting from side to side as he tried to understand where the shot had come from. He watched helplessly as the blood circle began spreading across the snow around them.

Anton's eyes slowly flickered open. The American could see the life ebbing from them. 'So it ends here,' Anton said, his voice as soft as a gentle summer breeze.

'No, buddy, we'll get you help,' the American replied quickly.

Anton tried to lift his head again but it fell against his shoulder. 'So it ends here,' he repeated. A smile appeared on his face but it was weak, contorting into a grimace as the pain enveloped him. His eyes snapped open again. 'But I got the last laugh, comrade.'

'The last laugh?' The American asked in surprise.

Anton raised a shaking finger towards the folder the American had dropped onto the ground near them. 'I've hidden the true formula,' Anton said his voice weakening as blood splattered from his mouth, 'and they're all so stupid they'll never see it's invisible to their eyes.'

Invisible to their eyes. What on earth did the old man mean? He watched helplessly as Anton's eyes flickered rapidly before closing for the last time. 'Shit,' the American hissed. He pulled his body erect, dropping Anton's body onto the ground. He looked around, lowered his body and scuttled towards a tree where he hoped he might get a better view of where the attack had come from.

A bird spooked by a noise in the clearing, shot from a tree overhead, spraying the American with snow. He brushed it off his shoulders, waving a fist at the bird as it disappeared into the darkness. He stopped. Somewhere, nearby in the darkness there was the unmistakable sound of a throat being cleared. 'Who's there?' He growled.

He saw the boots first, heavy and highly polished as they stepped into the moonlit walkway. The American's eyes widened in surprise. 'What the hell are you doing here, Anatoly?' He hissed.

A smile spread across Anatoly Petrov's face. He raised a finger, scratching at the port-wine birthmark which covered most of his right cheek. Even in the moonlight, the American could see the amused glint in eyes.

'Did you really think we'd let an asset switch sides?' Anatoly Petrov replied. His voice was light but hoarse, as if he was a heavy smoker, or a man used to barking orders.

The American turned towards the spread-eagled body of Anton Veckenov, his mind processing a dozen different thoughts and scenarios. He did not understand how Anatoly Petrov, a mid-level police officer could have known about the meeting. Had Anatoly been tailing one or both of them? In his line of business, the American had always known it to be prudent to give men such as Anatoly Petrov enough financial incentive to turn a blind eye to his presence and activities in their country.

'It's just as well I am here,' Anatoly said after a minute had passed. He pointed at Anton Veckenov. 'You'll need help with that.'

The American frowned. He knew he had not murdered the elderly Russian defector. But who had? He studied Anatoly. He had certainly come from the direction of the shot. 'No, I don't. This has nothing to do with me.'

Anatoly stepped over the corpse and lowered himself onto his haunches. He shook his head. 'Really? Still, it's best not too many questions be asked about Anton's demise. His work was quite specific. Imagine how it would look if I, devoted agent, found you, foreign agent on our land murdering one of our citizens.' He smiled. 'Tsk, tsk. Imagine the international scandal this will cause!'

Anatoly stood up, ambling back to the American. He pushed his shoulders up because he knew when he did he cut an imposing figure. He was a stocky man, with a fleshy, hard face, his eyes dark and intimidating. In his business, intimidating people provided a distinct advantage. 'Do you really want to risk being taken into custody, comrade?'

The American's nostrils flared in anger. He was not used to being threatened, especially by the likes of Anatoly Petrov. He opened his mouth to speak but stopped himself, distracted by the sound of a twig snapping on the other side of the clearing. He narrowed his eyes and exhaled, his breath

clouding the dark, damp air around him. He held his breath for a moment and cocked his head, searching for the sound of more twigs breaking. Somewhere nearby he heard an owl cooing and then there was silence again. He turned back to Anatoly. 'Did you come alone?' He commanded.

Anatoly raised an eyebrow in surprise. 'Of course I am alone. You think me foolish?'

The American did not answer, his eyes scanning around the clearing searching desperately into the darkness. There were no more sounds and he realised that perhaps his nerves were on edge. He cocked his head towards the remains of Anton Veckenov. 'You'll deal with that?'

Anatoly nodded slowly. 'Of course. I'll even make it look convincing. For a price, of course.'

The American snorted. 'For a price!' He cried with incredulity, 'you're not getting another cent from me, or old Uncle Sam, Ruskie, and you can threaten me as much as you like. You have far more to lose than I do should our relationship be exposed, no? I hear they have a special wing in Serbia for dealing with Ruskies like you who play both sides. Take care of this satisfactorily and I'll make sure Langley are fully aware of your helpfulness in the matter. This is all I'll do and it's more than you deserve.'

Anatoly scratched the birthmark on his cheek once again, studying the American with a burning intensity. After a few moments had passed he smiled, as if pleased with the decision he had arrived at.

The American continued. 'And of course, you know how they appreciate helpfulness,' he turned his back to Anatoly, tapping his finger against the lapel of his jacket, as if reassuring himself the folder was still there.

Anatoly stepped back in front of him, his eyes twinkling with something the American could not read. What was it, amusement?

The American pointed at the body of Anton Veckenov. 'You must have been pretty worried about what he could tell us if you'd rather kill him than let him defect.'

Anatoly shrugged. 'Traitors are traitors,' he offered by way of an answer.

The American's eyes narrowed and he did not answer. Anatoly was certainly correct about something. He did not want to get caught up in the fallout over Anton's death. 'What will you do with him? How will you explain it so no questions are asked?'

Anatoly shrugged. 'Oh, the usual, this area is usually a hive of activity, drugs, prostitutes, it's not too much of a stretch to imagine a usually straight laced man such as Anton would be tempted over to the dark side.'

The American nodded. 'Or...' he trailed off.

'Or?' Anatoly asked, his interest piqued.

The American tapped his finger against his broad chin as he considered. 'Or we kill two birds with one stone,' he replied.

'I don't understand.'

The American turned again to the body and tapped the folder again. If the information it contained really was as valuable as Veckenov had claimed, though the American doubted it was, then they needed time to explore its possibilities. A plan began to form in his brain. A plan which would get the American out of Russia, divert suspicion and pay back someone who he hated very much.

'I have a proposition for you Lieutenant Petrov, one which if you execute correctly should push you up the ranks a little. How does Major Petrov sound to you, Anatoly?' He added with a smile. Flattery was unfailingly important to men such as Anatoly Petrov.

Anatoly exhaled, his jaw jutting forward. He did not answer but his eyes sparkled like the moonlight above them.

'The Chinese are always sniffing around, aren't they?'

Anatoly nodded. 'I suppose, why?'

‘Let’s suppose Anton was selling the information to the Chinese,’ the American responded, ‘and when they got it they killed him. If your superiors believe the Chinese have escaped with valuable secrets, it will keep the both of them embroiled in their very own Cold War for years to come. And that gives you my dear Anatoly the career progression you so covet. You grew suspicious of Anton and trailed him, found him hunched in a conspiracy with the Chinese and executed him. The Chinese spy, sadly made his escape, but you might say, our friend here made a deathbed confession, expressing his regret at betraying Mother Russia, you know the sort of thing you need to say to sell this to your superiors, he threw himself and his lovely family at the Mother’s mercy.’

Anatoly’s tongue darted out, like a lizard trying to catch a fly.

‘Major Petrov,’ the American repeated, ‘national hero who murdered a traitor and chased off the enemy. You’ll be dining out on it for decades, my friend.’

Anatoly appraised him. ‘And what is in this for you?’

The American shrugged. ‘To get out of this god forsaken hellhole once and for all. If this information is as good as Anton says it is, it should be enough for me to buy that piece of land I have my eye on in the Keys and no-one needs to know where it came from.’ He laughed. ‘The spy business is a young man’s game my friend, and those days are soon to be behind me.’ He stepped forward and held out his hand. ‘We’ll leave it at that, *Major Petrov*.’ He gave another, self-satisfied laugh. ‘Well, dosvidaniya, Anatoly, hopefully our paths will never cross again, but if they do, forget you ever saw my face!’

Anatoly smiled. ‘You know what I like most about you, comrade?’

The American shrugged. ‘My dashing good looks? My caustic wit? I give up, you tell me, Anatoly.’

‘Your arrogance,’ Anatoly answered.

‘My arrogance?’

He nodded. ‘Dah. Your arrogance because it makes you stupid. You strut around like you are cock of the walk, crashing into my country as if you own it. Your arrogance makes you stupid, comrade.’

The American took a step back. There was something about Anatoly’s tone which concerned him. It was still friendly but there was a coldness as icy as the night air spreading through it.

Anatoly stepped around him, pressing his body against the wall. He reached inside his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He lit it, the tip glowing red as he sucked the smoke into his body. ‘It is kind of you, however,’ he said, ‘to think about me and my future and you’re correct, Major Petrov does have a ring to it and it is what I deserve.’

‘And you’ll get it, friend,’ the American replied in as light a tone as he could manage. He was not a man used to feeling fear, but in this moment, the caustic nature of his business was evident to him.

‘Major Petrov,’ Anatoly whispered to himself, a smile creasing his birth-marked cheek. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gun, he reached into another pocket and pulled out a silencer which he began slowly screwing into place on his pistol. ‘I know we’re alone,’ he said as if discussing something innocent, ‘but I believe it always pays to be prudent.’

The American watched as the silencer clicked into place. ‘You don’t have to do this, Anatoly,’ he said, unable to hide the desperation coursing through him. ‘You know you don’t. Whatever you want, name it, we’ll give you it, you have my word. Money. Power. Whatever floats your boat, it can be yours.’

Anatoly took a step towards him. ‘You think I want YOUR money? YOUR power? Your arrogance didn’t just make you stupid, comrade, it made you careless. Did you really think we were just going to let you walk away with our secrets? Did you?’

‘You’ve been playing both sides all the time, haven’t you? You double crossed me?’

Anatoly nodded. 'Double crossed, triple crossed, what does it matter? When will you idiots learn you NEVER cross Russia. She won't tolerate it.'

'So what happens next?'

'I think you know how this story ends.' Anatoly responded. 'I was surveilling a Russian traitor, defecting and taking state secrets with him and in the process I was forced to defend myself from you, an American spy, and you both were killed. Very neat, nyet?'

'You don't have to do this,' the American repeated. 'You know how the game plays, Anatoly. You take me in, your bosses negotiate with my bosses, I get freed, one of yours gets freed and we all go back to playing our War Games and we'll be friends again.'

Anatoly took another step forward. 'Not this time, friend, not this time.'

The American nodded, the realisation of his situation spreading across his face like a calmness. 'So be it. From one soldier to another, make it quick, dah?'

Anatoly's eyebrows raised, and gave the American a quick nod. He lifted the gun and with a squeeze of his finger pulled the trigger and a bullet exploded into the American's chest. His head dropped, his face crinkling in confusion as he stumbled and crashed to the ground. His blood spread beneath him like a cape across the brilliant white snow beneath him. Anatoly reached into the American's coat and pulled the folder out of it. He tutted as his sleeve brushed against the blood oozing from American's chest.

'You have no idea about the meaning of the word soldier, American, so don't think to compare yourself to me.' He stepped over the body and strode across the path. 'Sweet dreams, comrade, my colleagues will be along shortly to toss you on to a nice warm bonfire.' He called over his shoulder. 'That should please you the amount of time you spent whining about how cold you were!' He added with a chortle. 'But thanks for the idea about the Chinese,' he stopped and stroked the port-wine birthmark on his cheek. 'It might just work, kill two birds with one stone.' A smile stretched across his fleshy face. 'Yes, indeed. The Yanks try to get the traitor out of the country, the Chinese intervene and kill the American. I arrive on the scene just as the Chinese make their escape.' Anatoly snorted. 'Ha, the coward will high tail it back to China and get off our backs once and for all,' he said aloud with a self-satisfied flourish.

Whistling to himself, Anatoly moved through the clearing and passed through a row of trees where he had parked his car. He stopped dead in his tracks, he could hear footsteps retreating to the west, the opposite direction from where he was. The footsteps were soft and light against the snow. *Damnit*, he cursed. *I warned you what would happen if you didn't stop sticking your nose in.* He stepped out of the light and began striding towards the west side of the park. *I warned you, Salome, I warned you.* He spat into the snow. Whatever happened next he was doing for his country, and there was no place for sentiment. The stupid woman had every warning she was going to get. It was time she felt the consequences of her interference.

'You can't run for ever, Salome!' He hissed into the night. 'I'll get you, one way or another!' He said as he jumped into the car and slammed the door behind him. He pulled the radio mic out of its cradle on the dashboard and clicked angrily at the switch, the crackle of the airwaves breaking the silence. He exhaled. 'This is Petrov. Are you there?' He let go of the switch, his ear trained to listen to the white noise of the radio. Time passed, he assumed it was only moments but in his black mood it felt much longer. All Anatoly wanted was to get away, erase his presence from the space he now inhabited.

'Dah,' a voice finally replied over the radio.

A smile appeared on Anatoly's face, relieved to hear the voice of Mikel Kotov, one of the best agents he knew. The man who asked no questions, that was how some people referred to him, others

called him the man with no face. Both suited him, Anatoly considered. Mikel was a man with a cold heart, an efficient and loyal agent, as adept at killing as he was at slipping into new faces and disguises. He was, in that respect, the perfect spy, there had been times when Anatoly himself had not recognised the agent when he was wearing a new “cover.” He narrowed his eyes and pictured the bloodied remains of Anton Veckenov, his body spread-eagled in the snow. He smiled. In his wildest dreams he would not have imagined a more perfect scenario. He had always known recruiting Mikel was an inspired idea, but even he could not have imagined after what had just happened how fortuitous the decision had actually been.

‘I’m at St. Andronicus Monastery,’ Anatoly spoke into the intercom. ‘Your presence is required.’

A pause. ‘Shall I organise a team?’ Mikel asked.

‘Nyet.’ Anatoly replied.

A second, longer pause. ‘I understand. Dosvidaniya.’

The static flatlined. Anatoly smiled. The man of few words would be another good name for Mikel, though perhaps not as interesting a one. Satisfied, He turned the key in the ignition and the car roared into life.

In the clearing a rat watched as the car disappeared and silence descended once again upon the clearing. The rat emerged from a crack in the wall, scampering across the snow towards the newly formed blood river and began lapping hungrily at the thick liquid oozing from the American. The rat stopped for a moment as a pair of eyes snapped open, flickering with confusion as if they were trying to understand what was happening. Uninterested, the rat continued with his meal.