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# GRANDMASTER



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MURPHY

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# GRANDMASTER

BY WARREN MURPHY  
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# ***Dedication***

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*For Devin*

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*Somewhere a bell faintly tinkled.* The room was as large as a castle courtyard, lit by clusters of tall scented candles in each of the four corners, but the ceilings were so high that no light reached there. Looking up gave him the feeling of staring up at a dead sky on a night without stars.

Figures scurried by along the base of the walls. Their movements were soft, and although he could see only shadows, he knew that they were women.

Three feather-filled cushions, each of them eight feet square, were piled atop each other in the center of the room. A woman lay on the cushions, and he knew without being told that she was the one he had been summoned to see.

He hesitated, but the woman beckoned him forward with a slow movement of her graceful arm. She was naked but for a golden chain wrapped three times around her waist. As he drew closer he could see that her hair was black and long, pulled forward over her left shoulder so that it draped across her breasts. Even in the dim candlelight, her hair glistened like oiled glass and her eyes seemed to be made up of thousands of individual amber crystals, each of them reflecting light from the candles in the room. Closer to her, the scent of incense was stronger, almost overpowering. He drew it deep into his lungs and felt warmth radiate from inside him.

He stood now in front of the cushions, his knees almost touching them, looking down at the woman. Her body was as artfully arranged as an old master's composition; though she was naked, the placement of her hair and the shadows that darkened her made it impossible for him to see her clearly.

"Do you know why I have had you brought here?" she asked him in Russian. Her voice was musical, its pitch exactly the same as that of the bell that still tinged softly from one of the far corners of the room. He breathed deeply again. His body felt as if it were losing its muscles. He wondered if she had spoken or if he had merely imagined the bell was speaking to him.

She was looking at him, waiting for an answer. He tried to speak, but no words came. He shook his head.

"Because you belong to me," she said softly. Her eyes never left his face.

Belong to her? No. No one belonged to anyone else. He summoned up his will and again tried to speak. This time, with effort, he forced the words out. "Madam, I..."

She ignored him. "From the day of your birth, you have belonged to me."

"And if I do not so choose?" he said thickly. He was surprised that he had been able to speak the words; speaking was such an effort.

"The choice is not yours," she said, a hint of annoyance tingeing the smooth, throaty sounds. "You are only a man. Do not forget that. You are limited by your senses, your mortality. But I will make you more than a man."

She paused as if awaiting an answer, but he could no longer speak. The very presence of the woman seemed to obliterate his sensibility and reason. He wanted only to be invited to lie down with her on

the soft cushions, to rest his body and his aching, confused mind.

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"You are my chosen one," she said. "I have searched the earth for you."

He stared at her, unable to tear his eyes away from her shadowy face. "Why?" he asked softly, feeling cold. "Who am I to you?"

A smile flickered around the edge of her mouth. "In all things there is opposition, reversal. Yin and yang, light and darkness, good and evil. In those beings of power, there are also two sides. Do you understand?"

He drew a deep breath to try to clear his mind, but instead his lungs were filled again with the sinuous fire of the incense. This place was somehow infused with magic, he knew, powerful magic. Lapping around the borders of his consciousness was fear. The woman was soft and dark and smooth and rich as dreams, but there was no comfort in her for him.

"Is there someone who will come to this place?" he asked. "Someone to challenge me, perhaps? An evil man..."

The woman's smile broadened into a coarse, harsh laugh that resounded through the room.

The man did not understand. He waited for her to explain, but instead she rolled over onto her back without speaking. Suddenly her body came alive, breasts thrust forward, the dark curled hair between her legs sharply visible in the candlelight. She was holding something in her hands. It was a snake fashioned out of gold, long and curved into an S. Its scales were meticulously carved, its mouth open with its tongue darting out as if it sensed danger.

She placed it between her legs and drew it slowly between her thighs. Her eyes deigned to meet his. "Come to me," she commanded.

He came.

She held the gold snake up to him. Its luster seemed to grow in intensity, hurting his eyes. He feared the snake.

"Take it," she said.

Trembling, he accepted the carved serpent. It burned his hands. His very soul seemed to gasp at the contact.

"An evil man has already come," she purred. Her voice licked him with promise. "The Prince of Death has come. *My evil man.*"

He closed his eyes. He understood. "My goddess," he said.

She placed her silky hands on top of his. At her touch, his fear of the snake's power vanished. With a sigh, he snapped the golden serpent in two.

"Yes," she said softly into his ear, filling him with a deep, perverse lust that he realized he had longed for all his life. She had been right: He had no choice. His destiny was to serve her, to drink her magic, to live in spheres high above the scrambling and rutting of common men.

"My Prince of Death. You have the seeds of greatness in you. I will make those seeds bloom, my prince. And you will kill the golden snake for me."

"I will," he promised.

Then she opened to him and wrapped her body around his and, as the bell still faintly tinkled and

the air grew heavier with the scents of incense and carnality, she took him into the depths of his own darkness.

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# BOOK ONE

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## THE COILED SNAKE



*The dock on Pihlaja Island was deserted*, as it always was in Helsinki's black early mornings. The patrolman yawned and checked the luminous face of his wristwatch. It was an hour before dawn. Just another ninety minutes and he would drag his chilled body home and bury it in the warmth of his wife.

He heard a faint scratching sound behind him and he wheeled, his right hand slapping down toward his heavy leather police holster, but then he relaxed as he saw a solitary wharf rat running down the middle of the wooden dock.

He smiled grimly, faintly embarrassed at his display of nerves. The *punkkarit*, the local hoodlums frightened everybody. Each day the newspapers carried stories of their plundering raids, and all the members of the police's tiny dock squad had been warned to be extra watchful while on duty. Moorehead ships could be a paradise for vandals and burglars.

The patrolman's footfalls echoed heavily along the bleak wharf. His breath blew out in clouds. Soon all the harbors in the Gulf of Finland would be closed with the first ice. In the distance a sleeping tanker sent tubes of yellow light over the black gulf. Nearer, tied up to the condemned section of wharf where the policeman walked, another vessel rocked silently on the water. It was a fishing boat, sizable but ancient, a black, empty hulk without even an identifying name on its transom. He walked toward it. The boat was obviously abandoned, although he had never seen it before.

Suddenly, behind him, the numberless rats housed in the decayed pier house set up an indignant chatter and scattered in all directions. The policeman turned toward the source of the noise, a thin line of sweat rising across his forehead. *Punkkarit*? Here? He pulled his night stick out of his belt as he approached the low stone building.

But it wasn't the kids with their Mohawk haircuts and snapping switchblades. He cursed softly and smiled with relief at the dim figure crouched against the crumbling facade of the pier house. The man was asleep. He was dressed in a ragged sailor's jacket and a pair of filthy trousers. Under his head was a tattered old duffel, which the man used as a pillow.

"Hey, what's this?" the officer said in Finnish, prodding the man with his toe. The vagabond snorted awake and strained to focus his eyes on the policeman. "Get moving. You can't sleep here."

He repeated the command in Swedish. The man stirred slowly. "And take your things. You won't be coming back." He pointed at the duffel with his night stick.

The derelict obeyed. He brought himself to his feet shakily. Then, shivering, he dragged the ragged canvas bag away from the wall. He looked up at the officer with watery eyes.

"Well, go on," the policeman said, gesturing with his head toward the end of the dock. The man padded away softly, his back bent. The officer watched him go, then walked back to the black boat.

He stepped carefully over its mooring lines and scanned the vessel with his flashlight. Over the place where the ship's name normally would have been, a black-painted board hung suspended from two hooks.

That was odd, he thought. It was as if someone had purposely concealed the identity of the old hulk.

He leaned over the pier, reached out with his stick, and lifted the board. For a moment the name *Kronen* gleamed in white letters against the black crupper. The policeman straightened and let the board fall back against the vessel with a slap. He moved farther along the pier, the beam from the flashlight moving in a straight line along the length of the craft. He stopped, looked at the boat again, and shook his head in puzzlement. Why would anyone try to conceal the name of a boat? Unless the boat had been stolen.

He reached behind him and pulled his small mobile radio from the leather holder on his belt. Just before he depressed the button, his neck snapped backward and his spine lurched with a painful blow from the rear. The flashlight hurtled out of his hand into the water below, and the radio dropped onto the wooden dock with a muffled thud.

"What... what..." the policeman groaned, buckling to his knees.

He twisted his head and saw the hobo standing above him, looking completely different from the boozey tramp he had chased from the dock. The man he saw now was as blankly efficient as a machine, avoiding the policeman's eyes as he yanked him to his feet.

"No, please," the policeman began. But by then the knife in the hobo's hand was already singing upward.

The officer gasped once, his eyes bulging in shock as the blade tore into the left side of his throat and sliced up to his right ear. His hands struck out, jerking wildly, as if they had been electrified. His feet skidded. A stream of bubbling blood hissed out from his neck, forming a cloud of vapor in the cold air as it shot forward in an arc. His head fell back on the hobo's shoulder.

Silently, four black-clad men appeared on the deck of the black boat. The *Kronen's* engine roared to life. Keeping his head down to avoid the stream of blood, the hobo hoisted the body and heaved it into the gulf. The policeman's lifeless face, still bearing an expression of horrified surprise, shimmered near the surface for a moment.

The boat was pulling out. The hobo kicked the policeman's radio into the water, ran back for his duffel, tossed it on deck, and leaped after it. He caught hold of a rail and pulled himself on board as the *Kronen* sped out of the harbor.

His knife and the right side of his face were bathed in blood.

*The captain relinquished the wheel* to a crewman, then turned and stared without expression at the blood- and sweat-soaked man who stood before him, as if trying to decide whether or not to allow his visitor to remain on board. His face, dark and windburned around intelligent eyes that seemed incapable of surprise, held traces of both contempt and amusement for the man with the duffel who waited silently for his verdict.

"I'm only a smuggler, you know," the captain said finally, his English lilted with Scandinavian cadences. "Killing police is not part of our contract."

The man didn't answer. A heavy drop of perspiration rolled unnoticed down his face, streaking through the caked blood on his cheek. The muscles around his jaw were clenched tightly.

"Ah," the captain said with disgust and jerked his thumb toward the cabin below.

With a ragged sigh, the man hurried down the companionway.

Below deck, he stood in the small main cabin, alone, rubbing his arms to ward off the sudden chill that always came over him after moments of great fear. With some surprise, he noticed that the knife he had used to kill the Finnish policeman, a Bundeswehr combat model, was still clenched in his fist. He unclasped the hand with effort, and the Bundeswehr clattered to the floor. Its outline was imprinted on his blood-encrusted palm. He stooped over to pick it up, rinsed it off under the saltwater tap of the sink, dried it carefully, and replaced it in his coat pocket.

How long? he thought as he washed the brown film from his hands. He was forty-four years old, the oldest active field agent he knew. How many more border runs could he make before his nerve gave out completely? How much terror could a man stand in his life? He closed his eyes to the salt sting of the water as it ran over his face and head.

He dried himself on a rag remnant of a towel and, still shivering, sat down at the cabin's rough plank table. From his duffel bag he removed a watertight plastic pouch, which he opened and emptied onto the table. He had already checked everything in the pouch three times, but the difference between three times and four times someday might be the difference between living and dying.

He nodded silently as he checked the bag's contents in the dim light of the single oil lamp. There were two well-forged Finnish passports for a husband and wife. There was a Russian identity card with his own photograph on it and a set of Russian work papers. There was a fully loaded Swiss Hammerli eight-shot pistol. Inside a slim manila envelope was two thousand dollars in American money, an unimpressive amount of Russian rubles, and his American passport under his true name of Frank Riesling.

Enough, perhaps, to get him into and out of Russia with his two illegal passengers. Certainly enough to get him killed if he was caught before he reached Moscow.

But all this for a chess player?

He thought momentarily of the dead policeman, and his hands trembled. He bolted from his place at the table and ran to the small ship's head in the rear of the cabin where he vomited into the stained, smelly toilet.

As he sat again at the table and began scooping the contents back into the black plastic pouch, he knew he would have to try to sleep, despite his jangled nerves. He had not slept the night before, and the journey ahead was a long one.

The Finnish fishing boat would take him to Hamina, near the Russian border. Then Saarinen, the captain, would send two of his three crewmen to take Riesling northward, overland, on a route that ran west of the Russian city of Vyborg.

Directly north of Vyborg, they would leave him, and he would be on his own. The trip into Vyborg itself was going to be a bitch without sleep, he knew. On foot all the way, which was rough in October even with the help of a corrupt old border patrol guard who averted his eyes in return for a healthy bribe and got to secretly stick it to his superiors for busting him from a posh posting in Leningrad to serve out his commission in the frozen provinces.

*If* he managed to cross the border and *if* he managed to avoid the KGB agents on spy-catching duty in Vyborg, then he would have a train ride into Leningrad and an hour's flight to Moscow. The chess player, whose name was Kutsenko, and his wife were supposed to be ready to leave Moscow

immediately. The three of them would go back the way Riesling had come. In Hamina, they would board Captain Saarinen's fishing boat and be on their way to Stockholm.

All right, he thought. It had started out badly with the policeman, but it was manageable. Riesling had made the trip a dozen times.

But never before, he thought bitterly, on such short notice. Never before without first getting advance approval from headquarters. Was he right to go? Was he right to chance it? Stubbornly, he pushed the questions out of his mind. Two hours to Hamina.

He looked longingly at the small bunk across the cabin as Captain Saarinen entered, a grease-smudged bottle of Koskenkorva vodka in one hand. In his other hand was the remains of a large toothmarked *makkoira* sausage, and he gave off its fumes as well as those of the French Gitane cigarettes which he smoked constantly, insisting that the dark brown tobacco, unlike the "blonde" used in American cigarettes, was healthful for the human organism. Somehow, it seemed not to have done anything healthful for his chronic cough.

As soon as Saarinen walked through the doorway, Riesling rose automatically, and his hand darted toward the pistol inside the plastic pouch. When he saw it was the captain, he peered past him toward the small companionway behind.

"Sit down, sit down," Saarinen said with annoyance. "There's some trouble, but nothing to do with the business back on the wharf." He lit a blackened candle lamp on the table. The light cast huge shadows on the grease-spattered wall.

"What, then?" Riesling asked coldly.

Saarinen gestured to Riesling's empty chair with his chin and pulled a cracked mug from behind the sink. "You," the captain said, his dark eyes now twinkling like a satyr's. "I have brought you on this run for many months, yes? I do not even know your name, and yet I know you like a brother. And like a brother, I worry for you. Always nervous, always expecting the worst. That is your way, but you will drive yourself to sickness, my friend." He splashed some vodka into the mug and took a swig from the bottle himself.

"You agreed to take me to Hamina," Riesling said stubbornly.

Saarinen sighed. "Hamina, yes. But I do not think my men can take you to Vyborg."

Riesling reached into his coat and produced a thick envelope filled with currency. He slid it along the tabletop toward Saarinen. Wordlessly the captain hefted the envelope and stuffed it into his pocket. "Enough for Hamina," he said.

"What trouble?" Riesling asked quietly.

Saarinen poured a long draft into his mouth and exhaled noisily. "The Russians have doubled up on their Finnish border patrols," he said. "Your friend in Vyborg has been removed."

"The old man at the guard station?"

Saarinen nodded. "Shot."

"What about you?"

"The ship's running empty," Saarinen said. The *Kronen* had made a tidy fortune for Saarinen by illegally transporting food and small machinery to Russia and its satellite states. His three crewmen, all experienced smugglers, carried the goods into Soviet bloc countries and sold them at highly

inflated prices on the black market. Only one of his band, Saarinen claimed, had ever been stopped by the authorities, and that man had been killed on the spot, leaving Saarinen's lucrative business to thrive undetected.

Riesling, like Saarinen, entered and left the Soviet Union frequently for illicit purposes, but the goods he smuggled were people. Scientists, scholars, the occasional military defector—people who would never be permitted to leave Russia alive—had been guided by Riesling to the West. It was this mutuality of purpose that had brought the American agent and the Finnish criminal sailor together in a symbiotic no-questions-asked relationship that had lasted for the better part of two years.

"Is Vyborg the only place with reinforcements?" Riesling asked, trying to hold down a rising panic.

"Everywhere. All the border entries except in the far north. And that's useless. It has already been snowing heavily for weeks everywhere north of Kuhmo."

Riesling swallowed. "Why?"

The captain shrugged his meaty shoulders. "There's a new premier in Russia, and I expect the KGB is trying to make an impression so he doesn't fry their asses." He shrugged again. "It'll wear off before long."

"Christ," Riesling said under his breath.

"Even the run to Hamina is a danger now. Gogland is crawling with secret police. You'll see when we pass."

Riesling rose and went to the small porthole on the starboard side of the cabin. Gogland Island, a Russian outpost square in the middle of the Gulf of Finland, was not yet visible in the foggy dawn light.

"They won't stop us," Saarinen explained reassuringly, cutting a thick slice off the sausage with his pocketknife. "The *Kronen* is a fishing vessel registered in Helsinki. We are permitted in these waters. He stuffed the meat into his mouth and chewed noisily. "If not for you, there would be nothing extraordinary about this trip at all. We would have passed Gogland in any case."

He washed the meat down with a long drink of the Koskenkorva. "But Hamina is too far for an ordinary fishing boat from Helsinki. This time, we will blame the sea for taking us so far off course or the drunkenness of the captain," he said with a laugh. "But we will not make this trip again. Not until the Russians have decided once again that losing a few of their countrymen to the West is not worth the effort at the borders, eh?"

Riesling looked at him sharply. How much did the man know?

"Take it easy," Saarinen said. "I would have to be blind not to notice that the passengers with you on the return route were all Russians. The boots, the clothing. Even their breath is Russian. Don't insult my intelligence."

He took another drink and wiped the spillings from his chin on his sleeve. "Anyway, I don't care. I have not led a blameless life myself. But the difference between us, my friend, is that I have no government behind me, as you do."

He waved away Riesling's objections before they could begin. "I do not believe that you are transporting Russians out of Russia for your own enjoyment. So if the KGB catches you, they question you, a little torture, perhaps ..." He shrugged expressively. "In the end, they trade you for one of their

own spies. Not so bad, eh? But if they catch Saarinen, he hangs. So peace, yes?" He held up the bottle in salute.

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Riesling drank thoughtfully, his eyes never leaving the Finn. Saarinen smiled. "Well, we're only young once. My men will take you as near to Vyborg as possible—in Finland, that is."

Well, at least that was something, Riesling thought.

But not much. It meant he was apparently going to be deposited near a heavily guarded Russian border station and left to his own devices for getting into the Soviet Union and out again with the premier Russian chess champion and his wife.

"Unless you want us to turn around and go back," Saarinen said, as if reading the American's mind. "As far as the dock authorities are concerned, the *Kronen* has been at sea since yesterday. You won't be linked with that unfortunate policeman." He paused. "You didn't have to kill him, you know."

"Yes, I did," Riesling said flatly. "He saw the name of your docked boat, which has supposedly been out to sea since yesterday, and he was radioing his headquarters. A word from him and you might have trouble ... I might have trouble."

"If you say so," Saarinen said, but Riesling was not listening. Why the hell hadn't he been warned about the border buildup? Were they going to wait until he got caught? The CIA had its head up its ass again. Maybe he should wait. Let that damned chess-playing Kutsenko get out of Russia later, some other way.

No. He couldn't abort now. Kutsenko wasn't just a chess player; he was the champion of the world. His defection would make the Russians crazy. No. Riesling would go into Moscow and from there, play it by ear.

If he could get into Moscow. The Finnish border buildup might mean that his cover had been blown. His mind raced, juggling all the possibilities.

As if reading his thoughts, the dark Finn smiled and pulled out a deck of cards. "To Hamina?" he asked, shuffling.

Riesling nodded. At least playing cards would break the tension he felt. He placed a twenty dollar bill on the table. Saarinen, he knew, gambled only with American dollars.

"Very well, my friend," Saarinen said, digging through his pockets. With a slap, he brought forth a heap of crushed Gitanes, a dirty handkerchief, several matchbooks, a wad of soiled, sea-dampened bills, an assortment of coins of various currencies, and a lumpen piece of yellow metal on a chain.

Riesling gasped involuntarily at the sight of the necklace.

"All my worldly possessions," Saarinen said. He straightened out one of the cigarettes and lit it, spitting the loose tobacco onto his lap, then began sifting through the bills with stubby fingers. "I do not wish to lose the money you gave me for this trip at cards. With this new fire under the Russians' arses, I will probably need it." He patted his coat over where he had placed Riesling's envelope and laughed. "But of course, if it is an interesting game ..."

"May I?" Riesling asked, picking up the gold necklace. It seemed hot to his touch, and with a small exhalation of air, he dropped it back onto the table, where it glinted dully. The chain held a circle medallion the size of an American quarter. The gold was speckled with grime embedded in a thousand small craters. In the center was the figure of a coiled snake with a small droplet of imperfectly poured

gold at the base. Riesling's hands shook as he stared at it, unable to tear his gaze away from the ornament. It seemed to glow, and the spot where it had touched Riesling's flesh felt marked somehow as if he had been stabbed and the shock of it had sent a sudden shot of fear into the pit of his stomach.

"It is a strange thing, that," Saarinen said quietly. "I felt it, too. Almost a power it had. I nearly threw it away." He laughed quickly. "But who throws real gold away, eh? And the snake may be an antique. I thought I would hold it until I get to Stockholm and see what it's worth."

Riesling's heart was thudding. He had seen the medallion before. It had hung then around the neck of a man now dead, a man with extraordinary power, a man who had once saved Riesling's life.

"Where did you get this?" His words came out in a hoarse whisper.

Saarinen tossed a crumpled twenty into the center of the table and dealt the cards. "Podhale. Near the Tatra Mountains, in Poland."

Riesling looked up, his face drained of color. "Where in the Podhale?"

"A village about twenty kilometers north of Zakopane. I forget the name. Cards?"

Riesling picked up his hand slowly. "When?" he asked.

"What? Do you want cards or not?"

The American forced his attention back to the cards and discarded two. "When did you pick it up? The medallion."

"Oh, that." Saarinen laughed as he tossed down a card and dealt more from the deck. "I don't know. Two months. Maybe three." The long ash from his cigarette dropped onto his shoulder and rolled in a untidy trail down the front of his jacket. He sheared off another slice of sausage and offered the rest to Riesling, who shook his head.

"There's a story," the captain said, belching. "Some fool runs up to me as I'm driving out of the village in a donkey cart. Of course, I was ready to shoot the bastard—it was dead night and me without any papers and my pockets full of cash—but he didn't act like any kind of military type. Arms flapping, checking behind him every other second. So I figured a family man who'd stolen something in the village for a little food money. I had to laugh." He took another swallow and gestured to his partner to get on with the game.

Riesling breathed deeply. "He stole it from a grave, didn't he?"

The captain cocked his head and looked at him, curious. "How did you know about the grave?"

Riesling shook his head. A grave robber. Of course. There wasn't any other explanation. Even the Grandmaster didn't rise from beneath six feet of earth. He had seen the records himself, the photographs the Russians had gloatingly sent. Death was death, the final victor. For all the Grandmaster's miracles, he couldn't stand up to death.

He threw in another ten dollars. "I knew the man it belonged to," he said simply. "He was killed outside of Zakopane. In the Podhale. He wore that medallion when he was buried. That was four years ago."

Saarinen smiled. "But it couldn't be the same medal," he said indulgently.

"It was the same. The drop of gold on the bottom of the snake. Hand poured, very old. It'll bring you a hundred or more American in Stockholm."

Saarinen stared at him for a moment, then burst into a fit of bellowing laughter, banging the bottle on the tabletop. "Well, I'll be a son of a whore!" he shouted, brimming with mirth. "I'm going to make a dollar or two. Wonderful."

Riesling won the hand and scraped in his winnings. Saarinen handed him the deck. "Fucking Polacks'll tell you anything," the captain said, lighting another cigarette between bursts of wheezing laughter. "You should have heard the maniac. Psst. Psst." He performed an elaborate pantomime of a man whispering secrets as he scanned the horizons for unseen law officers. Riesling smiled. "Been in the family for years, he says. Belongs to the Undead One, he says. Shot by a Russian colonel. Buried in a rock slide. Dug up and buried again. Risen from the dead, yet!" He chortled. "Pretty good, eh? The Polish Jesus Christ."

Riesling dropped the card he was dealing. His fingers froze suspended in midair.

The Grandmaster had been killed in a rock slide.

"Excuse me," Riesling said, pulling the cards back to him.

Scowling, Saarinen picked up the dropped card. It was a deuce. He tossed it back with a grin. "Just checking."

Riesling said slowly, "He didn't happen to mention how he got the medallion, I suppose."

"Oh, he had an answer for everything, that one. Said his son found it buried outside the house where this vampire or whatever, the Undead One, lived. With the village whore, no less!" He guffawed so hard that tears streamed down his cheeks. "On my mother's grave, I swear that's what he said. Mary Magdalene, no doubt. I had to give him the money after that." Hooting, he drained the bottle with a vengeance and rummaged behind the sink for another.

"How long did he have the amulet?" Riesling asked.

"Well, maybe it was four years," Saarinen said. He belched loudly as he returned to the table with a fresh bottle of vodka. "He said he was afraid to sell it because the Russians might find out he had it. But he'd sell it to me because I was leaving the country."

"And the dead man?" Riesling asked.

"You mean the Undead One?" Saarinen said mockingly. "Remember? We're talking about a Polack vampire here."

"What happened to him?" Riesling said as he made a show of looking at his cards.

Saarinen lowered his voice into the hushed tones of a storyteller unfolding a tale of horror and death. "The Russian colonel," he said. "He came looking for the Undead One, and the vampire vanished. The Russian killed the whore in a rage. No one ever saw the Undead One again. The Polack swears the grave was empty."

"You're right," Riesling said lightly. "Another fairy tale."

Saarinen leaped from the bench. "There's Gogland." He pointed to a speck of land ahead, barely visible through the porthole. He ran to the companionway and shouted, "Cast your nets!" to the men on deck. Then he blustered from the cabin as the sailors above threw out the fishing nets.

In a few minutes he returned, bleary from the blast of morning sunlight. "For the sea patrols," he said. "We won't stay here long. No fish." He winked and sat back down heavily in front of his cards. "New deal," he said, shoving them aside.



Riesling gathered up the cards again.

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"Not that I don't trust you, my friend," Saarinen said.

"I understand."

"You think it's worth a hundred American? I got it for five hundred zlotys. What's that? Twenty American, I think. That's the first time I ever made a profit on a Polack. You know, my brother married a Polack. That's why I have to go there."

Riesling dealt. With a grunt, Saarinen put his feet up on the table and rested his head on the sink behind him. "Rising from the dead," he muttered. "Speaking English. Playing chess. Must have been drunk out of his mind."

"What's that?" Riesling asked sharply.

Saarinen raised by twenty. "Drunk. Drunk, I said."

"You said chess." Suddenly Riesling was shivering.

Saarinen smacked his lips sleepily and grinned. "Who knows? Maybe in Poland, Jesus Christ is an English-speaking vampire chess player. If you've got your own pope, you can do anything."

Riesling tried to steady his hands. "Saarinen, I want that medallion," he said. With a start, the captain brought himself out of his doze. "I'll give you two hundred dollars for it."

Saarinen took his time answering. He appraised the American slowly, his smiling eyes taking in the clenched jaw and sudden outpouring of sweat. "Sentimental reasons?" he asked.

Riesling worked to keep his face a blank. "The dead man had relatives," he said. "They'd like to have it."

"Ah, yes, for the relatives." The captain stroked the sooty growth on his chin. "Quite a large sum, my friend. The necklace must be a valuable object. To you, at least, eh?"

His smile faded. Riesling's Hammerli pistol was pointed directly at his face. "Two hundred dollars," Riesling said.

Saarinen spread out his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "My friend," he said soothingly. His satyr's smile returned. "Make it three."

Andrew Starcher ran his hands over his face, vaguely hoping that the gesture would somehow stop the headache pounding in his brain. He read the coded message from the American consulate in Leningrad in front of him for the second time, then reached in his desk drawer for the vial of Aldril.

"Tranquilizers?" Corfus asked, an amused smile softening his blunt Tartar features.

"Blood pressure pills. I'm a rare spy. I'm going to die of old age, I guess." Starcher shook out two of the tablets and washed them down with cold coffee.

At sixty-six, Andrew Starcher was a recruiting poster for the American diplomat—genteel, distinguished, his snow white hair and hawklike nose bespeaking generations of good breeding. Grimacing, he pushed the telex cable toward his assistant.

Outside, the first snowfall was accumulating in the cobalt twilight of the Arbat district of Moscow, its graceful old homes twinkling with warm light. In that snow, Starcher knew, someone was watching.

Someone was always watching. Any number of KGB pavement artists with their cigarette-lighter cameras and miniature radio transceivers invariably lurked around the American embassy at any given time, and the office of the cultural attaché was particularly fascinating to them.

Starcher had known about diplomatic espionage since his first days with the CIA, but it had always seemed like a joke. Even newspapers weren't particularly interested in stories about diplomatic personnel who were chased out of a country for spying.

Now, here he was, after twenty-five years in the field, arranging square-dancing exhibitions and tours of Moscow for American movie stars. He was vaguely embarrassed about it, even though it was only the cover for his true job as the top CIA man in the city.

Mike Corfus bent over the rumpled cablegram, squinting as he followed Starcher's decoding markings. His bulky appearance belied Corfus's sharp intelligence. The son of Russian immigrants who'd settled on New York's seamy Lower East Side, he had worked his way through Yale and had graduated summa cum laude right into the CIA, without any of the usual family connections.

He had been in Moscow only a month, serving as Starcher's eyes and legs. Where Starcher, locked up by his visibility, could only conjecture about what the Soviets were doing, Corfus could go out on the street and find out. He was Starcher's deputy in dealing with field agents like Riesling.

Corfus's immediate predecessor had died a suicide, hanged in his home. It was the sort of "suicide" the KGB specialized in for annoying diplomatic personnel. Corfus welcomed the risk. He was fluent in Russian, was as tough as a commando, hated the Communists, and Starcher trusted him.

"I don't understand the message," Corfus said honestly.

"It's very simple," Starcher said. "Riesling left a message at one of our drops in Leningrad. He's got a lead on two big Russians who want to defect, and he's on his way here to set it up. Saarinen brought him in."

"Who's Saarinen?"

"Some degenerate Finnish fishing captain whom Riesling always uses. But the message says that Riesling's got some big news for me."

"Hold on," Corfus said. "Two defectors. What two defectors?"

"I don't know. I queried Helsinki, but they didn't even know Riesling took off on this run. He went without authorization."

"Great," Corfus said sarcastically. "He's got big news for you. What news? Did he say?"

Starcher shook his head. "I think this is going to be the last run for Riesling. He's losing his judgment."

He reached for one of the thick Havana cigars he kept on his desk, debated whether or not to heed his doctor's orders, and the doctor lost. He bit the end off the cigar, spitting it out with guilty satisfaction.

Corfus said, "I don't know how the hell he got through the Finnish border. The KGB is crawling up there."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Starcher said. "Maybe he picked up a tail and knows about it. Maybe that's why he left this message so vague, just in case it got into the wrong hands."

"So we wait?" Corfus said.

"We wait," Starcher said as he lit the long black cigar.

As Corfus sprawled on the leather banquette alongside the large desk, he said, "I don't understand about Finland anyway. Why did the Russkies pack the border? They own Finland."

"They own Cuba, too," Starcher said, "and they're sending people in there, too." He blew out a thin stream of white smoke. Cuba was what he didn't understand. Finland was a perennial escape route for Russian defectors. The KGB could always make a case for beefing up personnel there, particularly with a new premier to impress.

But Cuba? Cuba was totally in Russia's pocket. Yet the island had been getting a slow buildup of KGB agents and troops, and despite Fidel Castro's loud complaints, the new men were neither withdrawn nor explained.

"There's no pattern," Corfus said. "That's what's confusing."

"Oh, there's a pattern," Starcher said. "There's always a pattern. Nichevo." He sighed. It was the only explanation, and it frightened him.

"*Nichevo*?" Corfus smiled, surprised. "It means 'nothing. Who cares?' It means a lot of things."

"I know. A joke of Joseph Stalin's," Starcher said. He walked over to the window and looked down at the snow-covered street. Beneath a street lamp stood a man, shivering in the cold, surrounded by new snow. He had not moved from his spot in hours.

Starcher laughed bitterly. "Another hero of the cold war," he said, staring at the little man below. But he felt the same twinge of envy he had felt every day since he had been posted in Moscow, consigned to stare out at the world beyond the goldfish bowl that was the embassy.

Starcher missed the field work. He had left his aristocratic southern roots to do battle in three bloody wars and every filthy secret skirmish in between. This world, peopled with misfits—from the

shivering little man on the pavement below to the secret masters who pulled the invisible strings that set earthshaking events in motion—this was the world he had chosen to live in, to die in. He had never married, never spawned the offspring from his family's ancient and promising gene pool. Because the work came first. Not the Company—the work.

It was a perversion, he supposed, as sick and senseless as the urge to molest small children. To be in love with secrecy, to relish fear, was more than simple patriotism. A man of Starcher's age ought to have outgrown it, he knew. Most agents burned out quickly and looked forward to working behind a desk.

Riesling, for instance. The man had been a good agent, cautious, experienced, and smart, but his nerve was giving out. During the past few months, Riesling had acquired small mannerisms—grinding his teeth, taking fits of shivering chills—that worried Starcher. And now Riesling's judgment was going, too.

God, he'd love to replace Riesling himself. That'd give a laugh to the administrators at Langley. A sixty-six-year-old man ... No, he thought, sighing. He belonged right where he was. Standing in a glass house for every first-year KGB agent in Moscow to see. The grand old spymaster, directing the movement of others, while he himself remained helpless, rooted, respectable, impotent.

"I just never thought I'd be the one who was being watched," he said quietly.

"Beg your pardon?" Corfus said.

His voice snapped Starcher back to reality.

"Never mind," he said, drawing the draperies.

"Is Nichevo a branch of the KGB?" Corfus asked.

"No. Nichevo's not a branch of anything anymore, except maybe Stalin's ghost. It started out as one, though. Small work. Blackmailing diplomats with prostitutes, paying ex-CIA men to write exposes of the Company, convincing the state to pump hormones into Soviet athletes, minor things to make the West look bad."

"Kind of a Department of Dirty Tricks," Corfus said with a smile. He had always liked the old man.

"You could say that. After Stalin bullied his way into becoming a Russian legend, though, he didn't want to be associated with the low-life antics of the group anymore, so he put his nephew in charge." He blew a perfect smoke ring toward the ceiling. "The story goes that when the nephew asked Stalin about the name of the organization he was going to run, Stalin answered, 'Who cares?' and sent him away. *Nichevo*?"

Corfus laughed. "Doesn't sound too dangerous to me."

"Ah," Starcher said, holding up a bony finger. "But the nephew turned out to be sharper than Stalin expected. He kept the group small, but over the years he replaced Stalin's thugs with a half-dozen of the best brains in Russia and the satellite states. He chose them himself, from the universities, the military, even from the civil service, but never from Intelligence, never from the KGB. From what I've been able to dig up, he worked with the Soviet spy apparatus, but he distrusted the bastards like poison."

He coughed, and his face registered pain. Cigars had been forbidden to him since a bullet in East Berlin pierced his left lung. That had been Starcher's last field assignment. A field career ended

honorably, according to the boys at headquarters. It was small consolation for the constant pain that signaled the end of his life's work.

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"Sit down," Corfus said, as he stepped over to Starcher to lead him to the leather banquette.

Starcher pushed him aside. "Don't patronize me," he said acidly. "I'm not the doddering old fool I look like." Corfus backed off, and, feeling guilty, Starcher harrumphed and sat down anyway. "At any rate, he found these men and women and gave them a chance to grow with Nichevo, dirty tricks and all, while the organization grew. By the time Khrushchev got booted out of office, Nichevo was in charge of planning big stuff. The invasion of neutral countries, the infiltration of propagandists into every undeveloped nation receiving aid from the United States, Soviet subs in enemy waters, the buildup of military bases hidden in a hundred obscure spots around the world, you name it." He spread his arms.

"Where is he now, this nephew of Stalin's?"

"His name was Zharkov. He died four, five years ago. Bleeding ulcers."

Corfus looked up. "Oh. Well, then ..."

"He had a son during the war," Starcher said, making circles with his cigar in the ashtray. "A very bright boy, brains right off the charts. Alexander Zharkov. Graduated with top honors from Moscow University, made full colonel in the army when he was thirty. Zharkov trained him himself since childhood. Rumor has it that the boy started attending the Nichevo directorate meetings as soon as he was out of short pants. Zharkov wasn't taking any chances about who was going to succeed him. Alexander lived and breathed Nichevo until he joined the army and was sent out on military patrol. He was in Poland when his father died. He came back to head up Nichevo."

"And you think he's behind the men moving into Cuba?"

"It's got the signs. No explanation and no apparent reason. It's got Zharkov's stamp all over it."

"Would he be behind Finland?" Corfus asked.

Starcher stubbed out his cigar with some viciousness. "That I don't know. I don't think so." He looked at his watch. "It's almost six," he said. "I want you to take up a watch."

"Sure," Corfus said, rising. "Here?"

"No, I'll stay here. Riesling will contact me if everything's clear. But if there's trouble, his fallback is always at the Samarkand Hotel. I can't be seen with him, of course. Bad policy."

Corfus smiled. "I understand."

"You've met him?"

"Once. I know his face."

"Good. If he shows up at the Samarkand, he's hot, understand?"

Corfus nodded.

"You'll have to move quickly. Get him to the safe house on Ohkotney as soon as you can. I'll wait here for your call."

"What if he doesn't come?" Corfus asked.

"Wait till nine o'clock at the bar—that's the most visible area—then order dinner. It'll give him a

little more time in case he needs it. I'll page you at the Samarkand if he contacts me first."

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Corfus hesitated by the door. "And if he doesn't get in touch with either of us?"

But Starcher wasn't listening. He was back at the window, peering out through the drapes at the small man standing, shivering, in the snow.

At six o'clock, Riesling was still two hours outside Moscow. He had stolen one car in Leningrad, then switched autos at Kalinin, hotwiring an old ZIL parked on a busy street.

Punchy. He hadn't slept for days. That was it. The dead policeman in Helsinki, the harrowing sojourn through the Russian border, the long drive from Leningrad. All of it had exhausted him.

And the medallion. He felt for it in his pocket. Even its touch was frightening, ominous. It weighted him with the same feeling he used to get on the football field at school, the dull ache when he was running for the ball during a critical point in the game. As the ball soared overhead, he knew—by the wind, by the awkwardness of his legs, his balance imperceptibly off, by some despairing cry within—that he wasn't going to catch the pass. It was during those moments, as if he had some special insight beyond reason or the connotation of words, that he knew he was going to lose.

"Just get to Starcher," he said aloud, letting go of the medallion in his pocket.

He searched his rearview mirror. Clean, no gray Fiat. All right. He'd lost the car, with its lone occupant wearing a white stocking cap, somewhere in Kalinin. More likely, he'd never been followed in the first place. In all probability, the man in the stocking cap was an ordinary Russian, a factory worker, a telephone man, just someone driving into Moscow with no more sense of Riesling's identity than the man in the moon.

He shook his head to clear it. When you begin to suspect everyone, when the stink of treachery permeated every corner of your world, you were finished. The suspicion would break you. It distracted you. In time, it killed you.

"Burnout," he muttered. No one was following him. He'd just spent too long on the job.

Once he reached Moscow, he would ask Starcher to recommend an immediate transfer. To anywhere. And a leave. He would go to Monte Carlo or the Aegean and drink himself stuporous and find a woman. And let all the men in all the white stocking caps go back to all their jobs at all the docks and factories or wherever they all worked, and to hell with them. No more. Not for him.

He dumped the ZIL at Kiev station and boarded a crowded metro car ripe with the odors of *tabaka* and shashlik. He had made it to Moscow. For the first time in days, he began to feel some semblance of safety.

All for a goddamned chess player, he thought, easing into the luxury of a vacant seat. A hell of a way for a good field man to go, over a two-bit defector who wasn't even in Intelligence.

Yet that was how they did go, he knew. An overheard word, a chance sighting, and death blew its whistle and sent you to the bench. No fanfare. No trial by twelve good men and true. Just a bullet in the back while you weren't looking.

He was sweating. From his pocket he pulled out a handkerchief and gasped audibly. The gold medallion was dangling from its chain in the folds of the cloth. He stuffed it quickly back into his pocket and rose, pretending not to notice the stares of the other passengers around him.

He worked his way toward the front of the train. Starcher was going to have to get the chess player out of Russia. Riesling was through. The trip from Finland into Russia had been rough. Trying to go out the same way, with the added baggage of a chess player and a woman, would be suicide. The border was just too tightly sealed. He wasn't taking anyone back through Finland again, ever.

He had three things on his mind. Tell the chess player the deal was off for the time being. Then get to Starcher. *And get rid of the medallion*, he thought, near panic. It was doing something to him, almost as if it had a power of its own that was too strong to harness. Christ, why had it come to him?

Perhaps because he owed a debt. It had been ... how long, eight years? Riesling had been sent into East Berlin to pick up a defector, but it had been a setup. When he went to meet the defector, there was no defector. Only the KGB waiting for him.

He had gotten out of the trap but, with a shoulder dislocated and a knee injured, had been able to flee only to the third floor of an industrial storage loft in a seamy commercial corner of the city. The KGB had followed and had ringed the building with men. That they hadn't rushed the building was clear indication that they wanted him alive, perhaps as a prime exhibit in some showy for-Western-consumption spy trial. There was no way out, and Riesling had carefully checked his revolver, placed his extra shells on the floor in front of him, and sat down to wait. One bullet would be for him.

He passed out from the pain.

Then someone was shaking him.

He struggled to open his eyes and then to focus them. The first thing he saw was a golden coiled snake close to his face. He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. The coiled snake was on a medallion. It hung around the neck of a young man with piercing sky blue eyes.

Riesling had tried to speak, but the man had clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Don't talk," he whispered. "We're getting out of here."

"Who are you?" Riesling said.

"I work for Starcher," the young man said.

"I don't know if I can move," Riesling had said. "My shoulder's separated, and my leg's messed up."

"We'll manage."

As the man helped him to his feet, Riesling saw that a section of the corrugated steel wall of the storage loft had been ripped open, as if by a giant can opener. A tear, shaped like the pupil of a cat's eye, four feet long and a foot wide, allowed moonlight to seep into the loft.

Riesling's rescuer led him to the hole in the steel, slid through himself, and then reached back for the American agent. "Put your good arm around my neck and hold on," he whispered.

Riesling followed the man, threw his right arm around him, and then they were moving down the side of the building, three stories down into a narrow alley, closed off at both ends, that separated the loft building from the tenement next door.

When they reached the ground, the young man helped Riesling to the tenement building and they went inside. Before the door closed behind them, though, Riesling looked back. He had thought there was a rope hanging from the ugly gash of ripped steel in the loft building. But there was no rope. How had they climbed down the smooth steel side of a building? He could not ask.



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