

“How much further Oleg?”

“Soon Mr, Jim,” said Oleg in broken English with an accent.

“Just Jim,” replied Jim. He rolled a cigarette around his fingers before lighting it. He inhaled from the cigarette and repeated his question. “How much further?”

“Close, Comrade,” said Oleg brushing his wavy brown hair out of his face. He navigated the car up a narrow road weaving steeply up the mountain.

“Good. It’ll be dark soon,” said Jim, looking at his watch. He had glanced at it every few minutes since they had pulled out of Sevastopol that morning. There had been little talking. A few hours after lunch they reached a small mountain village. They had been on this road for two hours. It had taken them that long to drive up the four miles from the small village road they had turned off of. Three times they had lost control. Twice they had gone over hills causing the roller coaster phenomenon to his stomach. Once they had had to pull over so he could throw up.

“You like American basketball,” asked Oleg.

Jim’s eyes squinted then he shrugged.

“You know. The NBA. The Bulls, Jordan,” said the driver mimicking a dunking gesture with his free hand.

“Yes I know of it. I don’t care for it,” said Jim smiling. “My kid loves it though. Especially Jordan.”

“Oh yes children love basketball, you should take them to a game when you go back,” replied Oleg. He looked at Jim and asked, “What we wouldn’t do for our children. No?”

“Unfortunately comrade, my wife got custody of my kids,” said Jim.

“I understand. My wife has my kids too,” replied Oleg. He lit another cigarette. “She is shackled up with a politician.” He flicked the cigarette vigorously. “But she did not marry him. She likes

the child payments.” Oleg slapped his chest and said, “What does Oleg get?” He looks back at Jim. “Oleg gets no visits with children. And I’m forced to drive for the gangster you hired to afford the child payments.”

“That is bad Oleg,” said Jim.

“I screwed up a lot. My wife is a good woman. She gave me plenty of chances.”

“Money is good at least,” replied a shrugging Oleg.

“Is the courier business in Ukraine doing that well?”

“Crimea is Russian. I am Russian.” Oleg waved both his hands up gesturing outside. “All of this is Mother Russia, and the western buzzards are everywhere,” snapped Oleg.

“Ok. Ok. Calm down,” said Jim. “Hopefully you guys are able to make some money off the top.”

“Oh yes. A lot,” winked Oleg. “Soon as the Berlin Wall was torn down western investors started flooding into the region. First East Germany after the fall followed by the former communist countries. Once the Soviet Union collapsed the looting of Ukraine and Russia began.” He looked at Jim, shrugged and said, “Будь что будет.”

“Whatever shall be, will be. That's what it means in your yankee tongue,” said Oleg. He lit another cigarette and smoked as he talked. “They buy up everything from oil refineries to newspapers to arms manufacturers. Hell they are even buying farms and mines unseen.” “But you’re not here to buy. I’m told you are searching for something,” he asked?

“Just drive comrade,” replied Jim.

“I’ve driven people all over this continent. They say drive. I drive.”

The car slowly began to level off. The groans of the old car eased off as well. The road opened into a large forested canopy that sat on top of an alcove jutting out from the mountain. The canopy was at least a few hundred feet across.

“Well here’s something you don’t see everyday,” said Jim. He careened his head back and forth. “It’s hard to judge how far back this goes into the mountain with all the trees.”

They drove further up the road. The mountain now surrounded them on three sides. A lone building sat back in the center of the clearing. Atop the building sat a large wooden cross. An empty gravel parking area sat about 100 feet in front of the church. A beautiful ornate walkway led from the parking area up to the church. The gravel crunched as the truck slid to a stop.

Jim grabbed his jacket and backpack. He stepped out inadvertently slamming the door behind him followed by Oleg. Fluttering wings beating in unison echoed through the alcove and surrounding rock faces. Hundreds of disturbed blackbirds had leapt from their perches amongst the trees. They circled the canopy as the men walked up the cobblestone path to the church. “I’ve been instructed to wait for you outside,” said Oleg. He stretched before turning his back to Jim to pee.

“Probably for the best,” replied Jim.

By the time Jim reached the front door of the church the flock of birds had flown down into the valley below. Only a dozen or so stragglers were still soaring above. A few had landed on the roof staring down at Jim as he entered the old church.

A small sensor connected to the front door silently alerted a switchboard miles away that someone had entered the church.

Jim expected the air to be old and musty. It wasn’t. An aroma of fresh cedar drifted down from the ceiling beams. It had been sweltering hot outside but it was cool inside, cold even. The

interior of the church was immaculate. He stepped into a large carpeted room with two rows of pews with four columns and a large pulpit towards the back. Behind the pulpit was a set of doors on either side. He crossed the room through the pews stopping in front of the pulpit. Two leather bound books rested atop of it. The first had Russian lettering. He looked closer reading the title, “*Синодальный перевод.*” He glanced at the other book, “*The Lesser Key of Solomon.*” He picked it up, turning it over in his hands. It was freezing, he examined it closer. The light blue leather bound cover was hand stitched including an exquisite gold outline. The intricately woven white lettering was embossed on the cover while inlaid across the book's spine. The craftsmanship was outstanding, unmatched even. On a hunch he placed it down and picked up the other book, the one in Russian. It was warm, matching the temperature inside the church. He put it down. He picked the other book back up, opening it.

“Well this must be the one,” he thought, placing the open book on top of the pulpit. He pulled a weathered piece of paper out of his back pocket and unfolded it. Writing was legible across the front. He glanced at the writing and turned the book to page 142. He folded the paper and placed it back in his pocket. Out of his backpack he removed a golden eagle. He placed it on top of the open book. A soft hum like a happy kitten crawling up to its mother emanated from the book and the eagle alike.

“St. Erasmus of Formia,” said Jim reciting from the paper.

The air grew warm. Gusts of wind began blowing through the church. Crackles of arcing electricity emanated from the book followed by flares of blue sparks. Then the book shot out a silvery substance that quickly formed into a soft blue circle. An image of another land appeared in the portal, it was snowing. He could see a snow capped mountain with an ocean behind it. In

the distance a lone figure trudged through the snow towards the portal. Towards him. On this side drifting snow was quickly accumulating on the floor of the church underneath the circle.

Jim walked to the portal and stepped through.

Outside Oleg had finished his third cigarette. He threw it down and walked back towards the truck. He heard the chopper blades before he saw them. A minute later two Russian helicopters came into view. They were flying low, circling the church. They were landing.

“Shit,” yelled Oleg. He rushed towards the vehicle but was cut off. A hail of bullets from the lead helicopter tore through the vehicle. Shrapnel from the car exploded. The tires blew next followed by the gas tank. The explosion ripped the car thirty feet into the air. The car broke apart like a cruise liner cracking in half before sinking to its murky grave. Oleg looked up and watched as the spent shells from the bullets rained down behind him clanking like hail on a tin roof. The second helicopter was now positioning itself to drop men down. He recognized a patch one wore. Spetnatz, Russian special forces.

Oleg sprung up pulling a pistol out from his waist. He fired twice at the two men preparing to repel down. Both shots were true. The first bullet went through the lead man's head, he hung limp on the drop line. The second shot hit the second man above his heart blowing him out of the helicopter. He landed with an awful crunch, dying instantly. Oleg pivoted toward the first helicopter firing three quick shots towards the gunner. Then he darted for the church.

The gunner had been caught off guard. Shocked by the sudden death of the two men he hadn't noticed the suspect take aim at himself. He heard the whistle of a bullet zing past his ear, he ducked. He popped up to fire but the pilot motioned him to hold.

The pilot finished a conversation with someone on the radio. Looking back he said, “We are landing. Apprehend that man alive. Command has questions they want answered.”

The winds churned as the descending helicopters blew dirt and gravel spewing across the clearing covering everything in dust and sediment, making it possible for Oleg to run unseen across the clearing towards the church.

Oleg reached the church throwing open the doors yelling, “Mr. Jim. We must ru..” He stared dumbfounded. There was a glowing blue circle at the back of the church. Jim was nowhere to be seen. The wind blew in sharp frigid gusts in every direction. He shut the door locking it the best he could. His teeth chattered. The cold winds blew through his wavy hair, he shoved it out of his eyes. Seeing the two set of doors behind the circle he headed for them. The closer he got to the circle the clearer the view inside of it became. He saw a land covered in night. He watched snow fall and could make out a mountain in the distance. Walking closer he stepped on drifting snow accumulating on the floor of the church in front of the circle. It crunched. A set of footprints in the snow led right up to the circle. He could see the footprints leading off through the snow on the other side of the circle. A couple hundred feet down the trail Oleg could make out a figure trudging through the snow. He walked around the circle to find a pulpit with two books. A brown one in Russian, it was an Orthodox Russian bible. The other one was blue with wording in English, he couldn’t read it. On top of the open book sat a golden eagle. A faint tiny wisp of silvery smoke like fluid came out of the book enlarging into the circumference of the portal. The book appeared to be not only connected to the portal but its origin as well. He looked through it from this side. A large head from a statue lay in the snow. Large knobs protruded from the head. An arching beaded chain connected the knobs to each other. It reminded him of busts of Napoleon or Julia Caesar he'd seen at the Moscow museum as a boy.

The sound of a dozen lighting strikes rattled the building. The soldiers had unleashed an endless stream of gunfire tearing through the front of the church. Oleg ducked behind the pulpit. After a minute the gunfire became sporadic before stopping. One of the soldiers yelled, “Come out.”

Oleg fired two rounds from his pistol.

Another volley of bullets was launched, this one longer than the previous. The church was decimated. Parts of the front wall had collapsed while the rest of the church was in various states of disarray. The front door hung precariously. A pin from one of its hinges slipped out clinking as it bounced to a stop. Most of the pews were splintered and destroyed. Oleg peered out from behind the pulpit, the soldiers were preparing to enter. He pivoted to turn around momentarily distracted by what he saw. On the back wall of the church was a silhouette of the circled portal, made of bullet holes. The first soldier kicked the door off of its remaining two hinges. Bullets blasted into the room.

Oleg grabbed the golden eagle and the book it rested on. He took a step towards the two double doors but was thrust backwards violently, into the portal. The portal snapped shut before Oleg landed. He landed backwards and awkwardly rolled four times losing the book and eagle before he came to a stop.

Chapter 2

Jim crossed over through the portal and headed out into a new world. Other than the temperature difference he felt no ill effects. He looked back at the portal. His eyes widened, he could still see the inside of the church, but he stared past it. Situated between the legs of a giant golden statue was the portal. He looked up at a headless statue standing in a defensive stance. In its right hand it held a sword and in its left a shield. A diorama decorated the shield but chunks of both were missing. Jim could just make out a figure holding a sword astride a great beast. He stepped off the trail getting a better perspective. He saw it. Behind the portal sitting on its side was the statue's head. On the head was a crown.

Jim stepped back on to the trail heading for the lone figure walking up the mountain towards him. The snow was soft and crunched as he walked. His cheeks burned from the bitter wind. After a few minutes the figure was only a few dozen feet away. It was a man but it wasn't. It wore a black hooded jacket with black gloves. The pants it wore were heavy leggings that matched the jacket and a pair black boots that looked military issued. Although it walked on two feet it had the head of a dog or wolf. Jim blinked rapidly as the dog-man approached.

Twenty feet out the dog-man raised its right hand and began vigorously waving. Jim waved back. It was a few feet when it reached into its pocket pulling out two tiny devices that were shaped like cylinders. Flat on one end and ending in a cone on the other. The dog-man took one of the devices then it removed its hood and simulated inserting the device into its ear, repeatedly. The dog-man handed the device to Jim. He looked at the dog-man, its chocolate eyes stared back. He sensed no dread, no ill will.

Jim nodded as he took the device, smelling it first. Silicone and copper. He inserted its cone end first.

“Do you understand me now?”

Jim stared wide eyed. He instinctively touched his ear and said, “Yes I understand you. This thing is amazing.”

“Good, I was worried. They haven’t been used in a few years. My name is Roform,” he said. Roform studied Jim glancing from his black hair to brown eyes down to his boots. He snapped his eyes up until they locked with Jims. “Are you the man who blew the Horn of Amos?”

“Yes.”

Jim held out his hand. “I’m Jim,” he said.

Roform grabbed his hand, shaking it briefly before pulling Jim close and giving him a great hug. Roform still embracing him said, “We are so glad an outworlder finally made contact. Many of us thought the other world only existed in stories.”

“What is it, a universal translator,” asked Jim.

“Yes,” said Roform. He gestured towards the trail. “Let’s go. The journey will take many hours and these mountains are unsafe after dark.”

It sounded like a faint whistle followed by puffs of snow popping into the air. Jim instinctively threw his arm around Roform hurrying the pair off the trail. After twenty feet Jim stopped. He pointed toward the portal and said, “Those were bullets zinging us. We had to move out of line of sight from the portal.”