

My Trickster

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Chapter 1: Return

Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her: but once they are in hand, he or she alone must decide how to play the cards in order to win the game. -

Voltaire

Return - Episode 1 (MacBride)

He calls, emphatically saying I must come. His voice arriving from the past, jerks me back to a place I thought I'd exorcised from my brain. Why is his memory still so powerful?

No reason, no explanation, we just need to meet in Moscow in a week! He gives me all of a week. Reluctantly, but sensing a secret burning, an unresolved need, I agree.

How will I feel, behave, react to seeing *him* again, and handle that almost palpable sense of powerlessness I always felt when I was with *him*, a powerlessness to resist *him*?

Too late now, the die's been cast.

With my eyes closed, flying silently through the night, I can almost imagine *him*: the power of *his* energy, a firm rhythm of his footsteps, as we stroll in the rain... Like memories smeared on shards of shifting glass, *he* cuts back into my mind!

A most rare and most beautiful species - instinctual and sensitive, but strong and assertive, funny and full of wit, but purposeful and serious; open and fair, but hidden and Delphic: a certain sense of *him* that I have always wanted to capture, but, honestly, how can you capture a *deer*?

‘Blinking Dots’ - Episode 2 (MacBride)

The local weather: -15 C. It’s dark. Outside, the bundled ground crew waits in the harsh glare of the terminal lighting. The plane touches ground, turns off the runway in a wide arc and starts lumbering down a snow-blown taxiway.

In the immigration hall of *Domodedovo International Airport*, hundreds of passengers converge on too few customs agents.

A sturdy looking man, a travel bag on his shoulder, finds a line and edges slowly forward. He moves, patiently waits, moves again. Reaching one of those Russian strangely attractive female customs officers, he smiles and hands his papers over to her. Impassively, she asks him the usual questions.

In the bright lights of the terminal, I scan the throng of impatiently waiting friends, relatives, drivers and assorted hangers on. Amongst them I spy a man wearing a fake leather coat, a sign with my name in his hands. I nod. He silently turns and leads me out toward a snow-grimed, yellow taxi, parked awkwardly at the curb.

As I follow my silent companion, I’m carefully looking for Pavel. But nothing! I experience a slight pang of unease.

Pulling onto the highway, the taxi enters the forested region that embraces Moscow in a thick coat of green. I peer through the window trying to catch blinking dots of *dachas* in the distance, the country villas much beloved by *apparatchiks* of the former Soviet Union, but now by the new alpha-dogs of Russia: the ‘oligarchs’ and their henchmen.

As we continue to drive, I notice a blacked-out Mercedes S500 that has been stalking us at a discrete distance. It’s not Pavel. I know his car.

My phone buzzes: ‘*Go to the Ritz-Carlton*’.

‘Kiss Him!’ - Episode 3 (A1)

‘I desire you solely to fulfil all my erotic pleasure. Taboo fantasies with us are our secret treasures’. - *‘Manly Brain Heads’* by Butterscotch

A blacked out S500 Benz zooms through the night city. Boiling with rage, a man in the backseat stares, unblinking, out the window. His cold, black eyes, glaring in the shadows, reflect Moscow’s streetlights as they flash by.

The car hisses alongside the curb and stops before the *911 Aurora*, a club on *Petrovka 18/2*. Throwing an abrupt order at the driver, the man steps from the car onto the glistening surface of asphalt. His dark blue cashmere coat streams behind him as he strides to the club door.

Inside, the crimson-lipped hostess in a long open back dress greets him at the entrance. Tossing her his coat, he impatiently brushes past, and signals to be shown in.

It is past midnight.

Exchanging a glance with the *911* hostess, whose lips deliver a silent message, I walk towards his table, making my way through dozens of glistening strippers, moving to the throbbing pulsations of the club music.

Stopping at the table where he sits, his face turned towards the stage, I fasten my eyes on his profile. Sensing my presence, he turns around. The insistent beat of the music crescendos slams our bodies with feverish vibes.

‘We need to talk,’ I say.

‘I see you like the process much more than the result,’ he replies.

‘I thought we had an agreement!’ I insist.

Turning away, he signals a waitress to bring champagne.

‘Agreements can be broken. I thought you would have learnt that by now.’

He brings his cigar to his lips. Inhaling deeply, he blows a cloud of smoke at me. I glare at him in an intense silence as the cloud of smoke slowly dissipates around my face.

The waitress brings the champagne. His eyes fixed on me, he orders her to stay.

‘Strip for my friend!’, he hisses, throwing money in her direction.

The woman hesitates for a second, unsure if she should act on the order.

‘I said, strip for my friend!’ he barks.

From the corner of my eye, but still fully focused on him, I observe the woman’s

sensual movements, her glistening skin, her body twisting and writhing in the stripper's trance. With each turn and twist she comes closer and closer to me, until finally, she leans in and brings her face to mine. I see her widely open eyes and feel the heat of her body pressing in.

‘Kiss him!’ he orders her.

Ritz - Episode 4 (MacBride)

'Expect nothing and accept everything and you will never be disappointed.' -

Laurence Overmire

Glancing periodically at the mirror, I wonder where Pavel is. Changing onto the notorious *MKAD*, the former '*road of death*', we head northwest round the ring. As the snow thickens into blustery clouds swirling in the wind, we arrive at the *Kutuzovsky Prospekt* exit and turn right. Grinding exasperatedly forward, we move in fits and starts, sometimes halted completely.

A large delivery truck creeps along our taxi. I see my chance and grabbing my bag squeeze quickly out of the car. A hail of blistering Russian follows, only to die, cut off by the slamming door.

I breathe a sigh of relief and blend into the foot traffic, funnelling for the Metro entrance. Emerging on *Tverskaya Street*, I dodge late-morning traffic, heading for the *Ritz* entrance.

My phone buzzes: '*O2 lounge, faberge chairs, noon*'.

Exhausted I slump into a lobby chair.

'How does *he* know my every move?'

Mandarin red and gold damask covered chairs line up in front of panoramic glass windows of the '*O2*' lounge. Their distinctive egg shape signals '*faberge*'. Heading to the eggs, I'm suddenly overcome by a surge of sickening.

A shiny red shoe pokes out from behind the first egg. Lifting her blond head, the occupant turns to face me, and smiles.

The next set of eggs, and no sign of him. Struggling for one agonizing moment, I continue. At the last pair, an elderly, distinguished looking man rises extending his hand.

'Welcome to Moscow, Monsieur MacBride! Allow me to introduce myself: Jacques Moreaux.' He greets me, speaking in the unmistakable French of a citizen from Geneva.

Enveloped by bitter disappointment, I surrender into the warm embrace of the red cocoon.

Taking the large cigar, he's been savouring, Mr. Moreaux motions to a nearby waiter.

'What can I get you?' He asks, smiling at me.

The waiter returns with a coffee for Mr. Moreaux and an iced *Kauffman Reserve* vodka for myself.

‘He disrupts my life, summons me here and what?! And even doesn’t bother to show up! The least he could do is to be here in person!’

Shooting a filthy look at Mr. Moreaux, I down the fiery liquor in a gulp and slam the glass to the table.

Completely unruffled by my fury, Mr. Moreaux pulls a crisp white envelope and passes it across the table to me.

‘He wanted me to give you this.’

With barely a glance, I stuff it into my pocket. He picks up his cigar and takes his leave. Worn out and angry, I sit in utter exhaustion for a while and then order a bottle of *Kauffman*.

Shot - Episode 5 (A1)

‘Either pull the trigger or get that fucking thing out of my face’.- Corky

The order coming as a complete surprise, the dazed stripper turns her head to Kazimir thinking she has misheard him.

‘What are you looking at? I said, kiss him!’

In the momentary confusion his order creates, I forcefully push the stripper away, and stand up.

‘*Svolotch!*’ I throw at Kazimir and start for the exit.

‘Where are you going?! I’m not done yet!’.

I ignore his question and head for the door through the tables and spellbound strippers. In the hall, I collect my coat and emerge onto the street, where Sergei was instructed to wait for me. His car parked slightly down from the entrance, he flashes its lights twice and glides softly toward me. I open the door and slide into the back seat. Accelerating, Sergei takes off towards *Zamoskvorechie*.

In the cold embrace of the leather seat I sink into my thoughts. Searching through the events of the past week, I try to grasp how things suddenly could have taken such a sinister turn. The answer escapes me.

I look up at the night sky. Big fluffy snowflakes silently descend, casting a magical white blanket over the city. Rolling the car window down, I stick my hand out trying to catch these intricately branched ice crystals.

As the car turns off *Bolshaya Ordynka* to *Pogorelsky*, I catch a glimpse of the digital clock: it’s 4.35am. I still have plenty of time before my meeting with MacBride.

We pull up before a set of brightly-lit stairs leading to the glassed entrance of a residential building, tucked between the *Uzbek Embassy* and the *Church of St. George Neokesariyski*. I step out onto the pavement covered by a thin layer of sparkling white snow. Turning, I smile and wave Sergei good-bye. He waits, watching me from the car. Ascending the stairs, I leave fresh footprints in the snow.

A gunshot shatters the night.

I gasp and stumble. A burning pain lances through my arm, blood quickly soaking the sleeve of my coat drips into the snow.

Falling, I catch a glimpse of the security staff rushing from the building, and Sergei’s face twisted in horror as he races from the car towards me. I reach out with my uninjured arm trying to break my fall before collapsing on the stairs.

'Holy shit!' is the last thought that runs through my mind.

‘Toro’ - Episode 6 (MacBride)

‘Do you ever have a single thought that originates from above the waist?’-Lawrence Jamieson

Penetrating my soul, the cold sends an involuntary shudder of bitterness and anger through me. I remove *his* letter from my pocket. Like an ancient talisman, the secrets of its unknown contents, the lack of any inscription are at once a powerful incentive to reaching out and connecting to *him* again.

I stuff the letter back in my pocket.

The bar in the centre of ‘O2’ has been quickly filling up since my arrival. Ordering several servings of sushi, including my favourite ‘*toro*’, I down some more *Kauffman*.

Not bothering with the niceties of chopstick dining, I have attracted the oblique interest of a pair of girls seated across the bar: a dark Georgian-looking one, and her friend, a pale blond. Two perfect enticing examples of single, successful Muscovites.

Between mouthfuls and shots, I take the two in with my eyes. The slow side-to-side motion of their stools reveals random but enticing hints of cleavage cupped softly by the silk of their gowns. Hands reaching out, lightly touching one another in conversation, they secretly eye me.

Smiling in anticipatory satisfaction, I toss back the last piece of ‘*toro*’ and order a bottle of *Moet Rose Imperial*. Taking the bottle and glasses I make my way over to them.

Outside, slightly dazed, I stand at the hotel entrance watching the girls’ blazing red Audi 8 being concierged before us in the huge portico. The Blonde at the wheel, the Dark One and I in the back, we peel out into the *Tverskaya* evening.

Letter - Episode 7 (MacBride)

'We are asleep. Our life is a dream. But we wake up, sometimes, just enough to know that we are dreaming'. -Ludwig Wittgenstein

Dim daylight filtering through the blinds, I lie in bed, drifting in and out of awareness. A phone rings, stops and rings again. I peel off the bed and stumble into the living room. Clothes, empty bottles and dirty plates greet me in silent rebuke.

The ringing stops.

Head throbbing, I stand in the living room and gaze at the mess around me. The buzzing starts again. I scan the room, my glazed eyes trying to locate where it's coming from. My jacket! Fumbling in twisted pockets, I drag the phone out.

It's Pavel!

'Where have you been? Just get your ass over here!'

I jab the phone off and drag myself back to the bedroom.

'And where the hell are the girls?'

Exhausted, I flop onto the bed. The last days' events start coming back to me. Slowly, swimming into focus, things begin to make sense again. I haul myself up and head for the kitchen.

A bottle of *Irn-Bru* in my hand I drop into the nearest chair. A white envelope lying on the floor catches my eye.

His letter!

I slit it open and shake the contents onto the table - a single typed note and a bunch of keys.

Dear Juan,

You're reading this so you've made it to Moscow. I wish I had called you earlier. I promise to tell you all about it when we meet. Soon.

Please use the keys. Go to my flat on Pogorelsky. Stay there until I can get to you.

Al

Visitor - Episode 8 (AI)

Light filtering through a slit between the hospital curtains crosses the bed and illuminates the handsome features of a patient's face resting on the pillow. Throwing an admiring glance at the patient, a nurse places a glass of water on the bedside table then tiptoes out of the room.

Woken by the pain in my arm, I open my eyes and take in the blue bareness of the hospital walls, the clinical whiteness of the sheets, and the transparent plastic of the table by my bed. Feeling an urge to see the light outside, I lift myself from the bed, and limp toward the window.

In the twilight of the early winter evening, a gentle light streams from the street lamps, bouncing off the shiny bodies of cars parked at the curb. As my eyes glide along their smooth surfaces, I stumble on a blacked-out Mercedes S500.

Exhausted, I return to my bed. My eyes closed I drift away but a loud bang jerks me back to reality. The door slams open. In storms Kazimir.

'Where's my agreement?!'

Propping myself up in bed, I give him a sly smile.

'Wipe that damn smile off your face! You know I hate it!'

In two quick strides he reaches my bed. Lowering his face to the level of mine, he hisses into my lips:

'Do not even think of crossing me!'

I stare right back into his raging eyes.

He straightens abruptly, his lips trembling. Slamming the door behind him, he stalks out of the room.

'*Svolotch!*' I mutter.

A nurse knocks and comes in, a vase of pink tulips in her hands.

'Your friend was here this morning and left this for you,' she says, placing the vase on the bedside table.

'My *friend?*' I echo puzzled.

Pavel - Episode 9 (MacBride)

'Who needs enemies when you got friends like that'. - Spanish proverb.

The doorbell rings.

'Pavel!'

I kick the door wide open. Pavel in a heavy wool coat and a knitted hat steps back as it swings by. I greet him faking a shot to his gut. Flinching, he dodges to the side.

'I need to fix you a real Russian cure for that hangover, ' Pavel grins and strides in, a large shopping bag in his hand.

In the kitchen, clearing the empty beer cans off the table, he puts his grocery bag down and starts unpacking it: out come a big jar of pickles, a bottle of vodka, and a 'Stolichnaya' sausage.

Seated across from each other, we sop up eggs with hunks of bread.

'So, where the hell were you?' I demand.

'I, er... I was... I mean... in a club. I met a girl...' Trailing off, he stares at his plate.

'You fucking shit!' I say in disdain.

Focusing on the food we fall silent.

'Al had this letter delivered to me. Didn't even come in person!' I break our silence. *'Here read it,'* passing the letter to Pavel, I get up to make some coffee.

'So, he wants you to go to his flat and wait? Sounds like bullshit to me,' says Pavel, crunching on a cucumber.

Blinded by sudden anger, I push myself up from the table. I know Al wanted me to come! But, this run around, maybe Pavel's right. Suppose the note isn't from him. Then, who is it from? Who would want me to wait in his flat and why?

'Let's go. Drive me over to Pogorelsky!' I say to Pavel, grabbing the bunch of keys Al has sent me.

Flat - Episode 10 (MacBride)

'Secrets and lies, the love in your eyes, everything is made to be broken'. - from
'Lost' by Beautiful darkness

On the way to *Pogorelsky*, thoughts flood through my brain in a jumbled wash of emotions. With a crazy sense of *Déjà Vu* in my gut, I climb the steps to *his* building. Everything seems strangely familiar.

In the lobby, a suspicious stare of the concierge greets us. We give him a friendly nod, but he stops us. Looking us up and down, he questions us then, satisfied, lets us go.

We take the lift up to the seventh floor.

At the door to Al's flat, the big shiny '7B' in brass letters set into smooth wood panelling, I pause, sharing a hesitating look with Pavel. Then taking a deep breath, I undo the locks.

A beautiful space greets my eyes. Large floor to ceiling windows framed with sumptuous curtains allow even the weak winter light to flood in and illuminate the furnishings. Momentarily at peace, I wander from room to room. My heart feels constricted yet my body tingles all over.

A pair of large crows flies by the windows, disrupting the light. A new uncomfortable sensation wells up. I turn and quickly head out. Downstairs, a question in his eyes Pavel greets me.

'We need to leave, now!' I say, forcefully steering him away.

As we move down the street, a large black S500 Benz pulls up in front of the building.

Chapter 2: MacBride

If it doesn't matter who wins or loses, then why do they keep score?

Vince Lombardi

‘Mask’ - Episode 11 (AI)

I pull the door open. Stepping inside I head to my living room. Sergei follows me in.

Brushing his help off, I get out of my coat, drop it on the floor and plunge into the silk embrace of the sofa. Relaxing, my eyes soak in all the familiar shapes and welcoming textures of my home.

I hear Sergei unpacking shopping bags in the kitchen. Done, he comes over carrying a crystal vase with the pink tulips I received from a mysterious visitor. Placing the vase on the coffee table in front of me, he throws a quick glance at me.

I wave him good-bye.

As the door closes behind him, I listen to the sounds of the flat, then stand up and go to the window. Pressing my head against the cold glass, I reach for a curtain and gently stroke it with my hand.

Outside, in the dimly lit street, I single out familiar silhouettes: the *Uzbek Embassy* and the half-built blackness of the building next to it; the empty sockets of its windows intently staring at me.

A whiff of musky scent hits my nostrils.

‘Don’t do anything stupid.’ I hear behind me.

Instantly, a gloved hand is clasped over my mouth. Steered away from the window, I am pushed onto the sofa. Standing over me is a broad-shouldered man, his face hidden behind a black mask. We study each other a while then, still keeping an eye on me, he steps away from the sofa.

Silent, I watch him. He shifts uncomfortably. A sudden burst of laughter erupts from my body, shaking me uncontrollably. The man in black mask waits, watching me, then comes over and slaps me across the face.

My head jerks sideways. I lose my balance and topple over.

The broad-shouldered man in the black mask, stands by the sofa, peering down at the man lying motionless across it. Then quickly checking his pulse, he throws one last glance at him, picks up the dark blue coat from the floor and covers his body with it.

Briskly walking out of the flat, the broad-shouldered man in the black mask closes the door behind him. Using the stairs, he goes down. As he reaches the rear door of the building, he takes his mask off and exits the building.

‘Coma’ - Episode 12 (MacBride)

I’m on the top floor of a half-built building. Standing in the window gap, I look through binoculars, focusing on the windows of Al’s flat. The flat is dark. There is no movement there.

Pavel is in his position, watching the rear exit of the building.

I glance at my watch: ‘7.00pm.’

Putting the binoculars down, I reach for a takeaway box standing on a pile of bricks and finger out a golden glistening meat pie – ‘*pirozok*’. As I munch on its soft ‘flash’, a car pulls up in front the entrance. Out steps a man in a dark blue coat. Accompanied by his driver, the man heads up the stairs.

I bring the binoculars to my eyes and focus on the man in the dark blue coat.

He enters the lobby of the building and stops by the lifts. Behind him, his driver stands, shopping bags in his hands.

As the lift arrives, the man in the dark blue coat turns to the driver, saying something. In the bright light of the lobby, I instantly recognise Al’s face. Al and his driver enter the lift.

I move my focus to the windows of his flat.

Soon, the lights come on in the ‘7B’.

Al, still in his dark blue coat, enters the living room. Taking his coat off, he drops it on the floor and sits down on the sofa. In a short while, his driver enters the room, carrying a vase with pink tulips. Placing the vase on the table, he leaves.

Al gets up and comes over to the window. Silhouetted in the bright lights of the flat he looks out. Staring right at him, I wonder: ‘*What on earth has happened?*’

Suddenly, a man in a black mask, comes behind him and clamps his hand over Al’s mouth.

I drop my binoculars and rush down. Running down the street to the rear exit of the building, I try to call Pavel on his mobile.

As we reach the seventh floor, we find the door of Al’s flat unlocked. We push it open and burst in. In the living room, Al is lying on the sofa, his dark blue coat over his sprawled body. I tear the coat off and quickly check his pulse. Shaking him, I try to wake him up.

‘Call for a fucking ambulance!’ I scream at Pavel, who is standing dumb-struck next to me.

As we race to the hospital, the slow beep of AI's heart beats mechanically out into space.

‘Rendezvous’ - Episode 13 (A1)

My faintly beating heart softly echoes in the vacuum surrounding me. Weightless, flying through a world of unconsciousness, I sense a pulsing energy reaching out to me. Sucking me in, it draws me out.

I open my eyes and slowly regain consciousness. Blinking from the bright sunlight, flooding the hospital room, I pull the oxygen mask down and take a deep breath. Beside me, a man is slumped asleep in a chair. His head, lies buried in his arms.

Glancing down I see the man’s thick, slightly curly hair, his muscled arms in the sleeves of his knitted white sweater.

‘Mac...’

Hearing a soft knock at the door, I pull the oxygen mask back on, and close my eyes.

Someone walks in, softly approaching my bed. I can feel the presence of the visitor, standing over me, quietly peering down at me.

In a few seconds, I hear the visitor walk to the door and exit the room, the door softly closing behind him.

I wait until his footsteps recede into the depths of the hospital corridor and open my eyes. On the bedside table I notice a vase of pink tulips.

Stirring, Mac shifts his body. Lifting his head up he looks at me.

My oxygen mask on, I look back at him.

He straightens up and locks me into an awkward embrace. His arms around me, I feel his heart pounding strongly close to mine.

He draws back and smiles.

‘So, Mac, you’ve made it to Moscow after all,’ I utter, pulling the oxygen mask down.

You! - Episode 14 (MacBride)

'When I cannot look at your face I look at your feet'. - 'Your Feet' by Pablo Neruda

With Al's intense blue eyes on me I feel compelled to step back. Looking at him lying there, his hair framing the pale skin of his face, his charming smile directed at me, I feel emotionally torn.

'What the fuck's this all about, Al?' I suddenly blurt out, losing control.

'And what do *you* think it is all about, Mac?' he replies, the smile disappears from his face in an instant.

'I have no fucking idea! You tell me!'

Stifled by my roaring emotions, I turn away. An electrifying silence falls between us.

'Mac, you have not changed a bit.' he starts.

'No, Al! *You* haven't changed a bit!' I cut in.

Avoiding my eyes, he looks down.

'Mac, I know I owe you a lot, but it is the way you are that makes me wonder if I can ever rely on you. Why can't you just let me be, trust me without questioning?'

'Trust you?' I cry out in contempt, 'Trust you, after what you had done? You vanish from my life without a trace, not even a note, leaving me to wonder why for ten bloody years!'

'I know, the evidence is against me, but sometimes in life the cruellest cuts are the softest,' he says lifting his head and locking his piercing eyes on mine.

'I don't believe you, Al.'

'If you don't believe me, then why are you here?'

Tearing the tubes from his arm, he lifts himself up, and steps onto the floor. In his hospital gown he looks almost innocent, vulnerable.

'Why are you here, Mac?' he repeats, glaring at me with his raging blue eyes.

'I want to help you...'

'What makes you think that I *need* your help?'

'But it's *you* who called me! *You* wrote me a note asking me to be in *your* flat, wait for *you* there!'

'Mac, all I asked of you was to be in Moscow! I never wrote any notes to you!'

Suddenly, his whole body starts shaking. Turning pale, exhausted, he sits back on the bed.

Struck by a sudden thought, I hurriedly go over to a small wardrobe tucked in the corner of the room. Swinging its doors open, I grab his clothes and throw them on the bed next to him.

‘Here, get dressed.’

Enlighten Me - Episode 15 (MacBride)

I take my phone out and call Pavel. Briefly, I give him instructions on meeting us. Hearing Al struggling into his clothes, I offer my help.

‘Let me alone, Mac!’ he snaps at me.

‘God, do you always have to be so fucking...’

‘Stubborn’ you mean?’

‘Fucking right. For no good reason too.’

‘I can do without your help!’ he says, throwing a box of surgical gloves in my face. Twisting away, I easily avoid the box.

Outside, Pavel’s waiting with the car. Throwing Al’s coat into the front seat, I thrust into the back. He follows me, slamming the car door.

‘What’s wrong with you two?’ Pavel asks, surprised.

‘And, who the fuck are you?’ Al spits out at him.

‘That’s enough, Al! Pavel’s with us.’

‘Right! And, where are we going, Mac?’

‘My place.’

‘*Your* place, what a wonderful news!’

‘Pavel! Stop the car! Kick him out!’ I shout, fed up.

‘Yeah! That’s right, Mac, kick me out of the car.’

‘Well, listen to you. You call. I arrive and you still won’t enlighten me!’

‘Enlighten you on what? If you were smart enough you would have never gone to my bloody flat.’

‘Why do you need me here so desperately? What’s this *shit* you gotten yourself into?’

‘I haven’t gotten myself into any *shit*! That’s how *you* perceive it, Mac.’

‘And until you convince me otherwise, yes ... SHIT!’

‘I don’t have to convince you of anything. Stop the fucking car, I’m getting out.’

‘Pavel, let the damn son of a bitch out!’ I chock with anger.

‘Mac... Take it easy, man,’ Pavel cuts in.

Engulfed in in an awkward silence, we drive on.

Despair - Episode 16 (Al)

Infuriated by the useless argument that sparked so easily between us, I stare out the window. He's right, it was me who asked him to come all way to Moscow.

So, now that he's here what shall I tell him?

As soon as Pavel stops the car, Mac races out. Following him, we proceed in awkward silence into the building. Inside, Mac angrily fiddles with the lock trying to get the door open. Finally, yanking it free, he lets us in.

'Al, why don't you take a shower?' Pavel says, as he gently steers me towards the bathroom.

'Mac, get him some vodka. I'm going for food,' he throws and leaves the flat.

Mac gets a bottle of vodka out. Taking a huge swig, he hands it to me. Hesitating, I look at him then take the bottle and walk into the bathroom.

Alone, the door locked, I stop in front of a large mirror, peer at my reflection then slide down to the floor and prop myself against the bathtub.

I stare blankly at the wall as my whole body shakes, wracked uncontrollably by waves of sobbing. Caught unawares by this unexpected emotion, I struggle anew with the foreign feelings it has stirred in me. I reach for the bottle, bring it to my trembling lips and gulp some down. The unfamiliar harshness of its fire stuns me. I cough, spilling some liquid on the bathroom floor. Feeling of despair gripping me as I slump forward.

'Al... are you alright?' Mac asks, his voice muffled through the door. Lifting my head, I look up.

"Al..."

I wait.

'When you called for me, I realized how much I'd missed you and how empty my life has been without you. That is why I came to Moscow.'

I sit there, his words slowly sinking in, then stand up and undo the lock.

Rooted - Episode 17 (MacBride)

The lock clicks. The door slides open.

Seeing him close to me I'm dismayed: he stands vulnerable before me like I never saw him before. I look into his eyes searching for answers, wanting to reach out but hesitate.

'Why is he so fucking complicated!?'

Rooted to the floor, I just stare at him. The moment passes. Walking by me, he goes into the room and sits down on the sofa. I come over and sit down beside him. For a moment, we both stare out into the room.

'Al... Hearing from you was almost like yesterday, like you never disappeared.' I say, breaking our silence.

'Mac, how did you know where to find me?'

'I was supposed to meet you at the *Ritz*, instead some old man hands me a note saying to go wait at your flat.'

'What was his name?'

'I think his name was Jacques Moreaux.'

'Jacques Moreaux? Never heard of him,' he says.

'He said you'd sent him.'

'What was in the note he gave you?'

'Had your address in it. Your keys were in there too.'

'My keys?' he echoes, looking puzzled.

'Wait a minute! You're telling me you have no idea who these people are, the people who are after you, attacking, trying to kill you?'

'No. But what bothers me most is how did they know you were coming to Moscow?'

'Yes, I'd barely left the airport and some bastard in a big black Benz was tailing me!'

'S500?'

'Yes, I've seen it several times already, stalking around. It was by your flat too.'

'Someone I know drives an S500. It's Kazimir. I saw him the night before I was supposed to meet you. We were in a club together,' he says, looking unblinking in front of him.

'Al, it sounds like you are tangled in a web of too many unknowns.'

‘Unknowns are my speciality, Mac.’

‘I know. But some of these unknowns are close to killing you,’ I respond.

‘Life is all about unknowns that are close to killing you. That is why you are here, Mac to help me with the ‘unknowns’”

‘Okay, philosophy’s great, but you need to give me some *knowns* so I can help. Right now, I’m stuck in a cloud of unknowns.’

‘As I am, Mac, as I am,’ he says, finally smiling.

‘Shit’ - Episode 18 (MacBride)

‘See you in the kitchen,’ I say to Al and leave the room.

In the kitchen, Pavel’s busy setting some *zakuski* out on the table.

‘Any progress?’ He greets me as I come in.

‘Good fucking question! I am afraid he’s still playing games,’ I reply, pouring myself some vodka. Handing Pavel a glass too, I change the subject.

‘What are you fixing?’

‘*Blini.*’

In the background, I hear the shower being turned on.

‘Based on what I know, he really has no idea what’s going on. In fact, Pavel, I think you and I know almost as much.’

‘Sure thing! Let me try and see whether I can get some sense out of him.’

Taking a mouthful of vodka, I agree.

‘You know Mac, that black Benz you keep seeing, there’s something about it.’

‘Go on.’

‘I don’t know, but there’s this guy, he’s involved in nightclubs and all kinds of shit. His name is Kazimir. Drives in a big Benz.’

‘I see. Al mentioned him while you were out.’

As Pavel places a nice pile of ‘*blinis*’ on the table, Al walks in.

‘Al, I hear you are somehow involved with this guy Kazimir. Runs clubs or something?’ Pavel says, smiling at Al, as he sits down beside me.

‘How do you know Kazimir?’ he responds, shooting a glance at Pavel.

‘I used to work for the *Special Police Unit*. We always had to somehow deal with his shit. Never able to haul him in though,’ Pavel explains, seating himself across from us.

‘Right... What’s this ‘*shit*’ is based on?’ enquires Al.

‘Well, there’s the 911 for starters. Never saw so many strippers in one place in my life. Always trying to low ball his taxes.’

‘I don’t think you know what you’re talking about, Pavel. You should check again on the information you got in your *Special Police Uni*,’ Al grins.

‘Al, if you know so much about this guy, why don’t you tell us,’ I interject.

‘All I am saying, Mac, is that just perhaps your friend here knows some other Kazimir, a *different* one from the one I know.’

‘That may be possible, but you might be only aware of some things this guy is up to. You mentioned him before with the black Benz. There was a black Benz that drove to your flat. Let’s figure out whether it’s the same guy!’

‘I was thinking out aloud, that’s all. Besides, as I told you already, Kazimir was in the club with me on the night I was shot. I doubt he has anything to do with the recent events.’

‘What makes you so sure?’ I enquire.

‘I don’t think he would personally drive around, chasing me. If he wished, he’d hire other people to do it for him. Besides, he deals with far more important stuff than nightclubs. He does frequent them often though.’

‘Kazimir uses his clubs to launder money. One of many cover operations,’ Pavel cuts in.

‘Interesting point, Pavel!’ says Al.

‘So... something rings a bell, Al!’ I exclaim.

‘What rings a bell is that perhaps Pavel’s right about laundering money. But, why would he want to kill me then?’

‘You tell us. What’s your involvement with him anyway?’ I blurt out.

Al falls silent, looking down at his plate.

‘What, you just happened to bump into him?’ I press on.

Still looking at his plate, Al remains silent.

Stop! - Episode 19 (MacBride)

‘Okay, let’s go over recent events and see if there’s a pattern,’ I suggest, deliberately ignoring Al.

‘Let’s start with the various players,’ Pavel begins.

‘From the airport I was trailed by the black Benz S500,’ I start, ‘I was texted twice by someone with instructions. There was this Jacques Moreuax at the *Ritz*. Wait a minute. Al, you said that you had encountered Kazimir in the club, right?’

‘Yes, right,’ he confirms.

‘Okay,’ I continue, ‘then, later, staking out your flat from the building site across the street.... No, wait! Al, you were shot! When was that?’

‘On that morning we were supposed to meet at about 4.35am...’

‘Okay. Another possible player. By the way, do you think this was a warning shot of some kind?’ I ask.

‘I can’t really say, as at the time of the shot I didn’t know if it was a warning or not.’

‘I’d think a warning shot was more likely. The shooter was probably across the street in the same building I was in later. He would have had a clear shot and could have killed you easily,’ I chime in.

‘Yes, I suppose you are right, Mac,’ Al replies.

‘Anyway, an unknown player. So, I’m staking out your flat and see this man grab you from behind. Al, what happened then?’

‘I remember standing by the window, being grabbed by a masked man. Then he slapped me and this is where I don’t remember what happened.’

‘What is it with you and all these people?’ I burst out.

‘Back off Mac!’ he throws back at me.

‘Look Al, you’re in deep shit,’ Pavel retorts.

‘I am here to share only the information that matters. The rest’s none of your business.’

‘Well then why are you so protective of Kazimir? According to Pavel he’s a very bad guy tied up in all kinds of scams. Scams that lead to murder!’ I cry out.

‘Perhaps he is, but I honestly don’t believe he did it. I have a good reason for thinking so... Trust me on this!’

‘Al...,’ Pavel begins.

‘No, Pavel! You’re barking up the wrong tree!’

‘Al, to rule out Kazimir...,’ Pavel tries again.

‘That is enough!’ Al says and marches out of the room.

‘Give me a damn chance will you!’ Pavel shouts after him.

‘You know Mac, what’s with this crazy son of a bitch? What the hell are we doing here tied up in this irrational shit? If he doesn’t begin accepting some of what we say there’s no way to help him.’

Grabbing the bottle, Pavel takes a massive gulp. Then slams it back on the table.

Escape - Episode 20 (A1)

'Bloody morons!'

Swearing to myself, I start pacing the room. What on earth was I thinking asking MacBride to come to Moscow? The whole situation seems to have become more complicated since his arrival.

'Why can't he leave Kazimir alone?'

Done with my pacing, I grab my travel bag and shake its contents out. Picking the mobile up, I dial Sergei's number. Impatiently, I listen to the ringing at the other end. Finally, hearing Sergei's voice, I ask:

'Where are you?'

'Walking the dog, why? I was beginning to get worried since I didn't hear from you this morning. Is everything...'

*'Yes! Everything's fine! I need you to go to *Pogorelsky*, get some stuff for me.'*

I give his instructions, toss the mobile on the bed, then pick up my clothes from the chair. Dressing proves to be excruciatingly slow as I struggle with buttoning, fastening and zipping. Twisting and turning, I fight with my clothes, repeating, *'It's okay, in the end, I always come out on top, I always do!'*

Exhausted, I sit back on the sofa, taking some time to compose myself.

Finally using my good hand, I throw my phone and my other things back into my travel bag and look around, searching for my coat. Not finding it and remembering it's still covered in blood, I decide to leave it behind.

Slowly opening the bedroom door, I step into the dim light of the corridor. Mac and Pavel are still in the kitchen. I pass quietly down the hall. Reaching the front door, I undo the locks and slip out of the flat.

Chapter 3: Green Jacket

Take Care - Episode 21 (AI)

Outside, the cold wind hits me.

Turning the corner, I walk to the main street, in search of a taxi. It's rush hour and an endless procession of cars zoom by me. Finally, an old Volga stops and after a quick negotiation on the price, I slide into the back seat.

'Where to?' A middle-aged driver says, smiling at me.

'*Kholodilnui Pereulok!*' I snap.

I stare out the window. The ride seems to go on endlessly. Nervously looking at my watch, I can't wait to get out of the car. We pull up in front of one of the grey, industrial looking skyscrapers that dot Moscow.

'*Why on earth, with all his money, does Kazimir need to be in this dull monstrosity of a building?!*' I wonder, as I enter through its glass doors.

I nod at the concierge and walk to the lifts. Getting out on the seventeenth floor, I arrive at a crudely soundproofed door and push my way in. Entering an empty reception room, I head for Kazimir's office. Without knocking, I pull the door wide open.

Behind his large glass desk, Kazimir sits. Lifting his head from the papers, he looks at me, a slight surprise in his stare.

'AI?'

'Yes, it's me, you are not hallucinating.'

'You... look rough! Where the fuck have you been?'

Without looking at him, I walk to a black leather sofa and thrust myself into it.

'Coffee?' he asks.

Not receiving an answer, Kazimir picks up his cigar and, inhaling deeply, blows a cloud of smoke in my direction.

'Have you spoken to Voronov?'

'No, I haven't. I've just come back from hell, and on the way, I haven't had a chance to speak to Voronov!' I bust out.

'How are you going to get an agreement then? And I needed it yesterday, already!'

'Kazimir, I bloody know it! Stop reminding me every chance you get!'

Another wave of tiredness hits me. Slumping forward, I bury my head in my hands.

Approaching the sofa, Kazimir sits down next to me. A scent of expensive perfume wafts my nostrils.

My head still in my hands, I feel his penetrating stare.

‘I’m going hunting to Finland this weekend. Join me, will you?’ He says.

‘Sure, but first I need to go to Saint Petersburg. Sergei’s picking me up in 10 minutes,’ I say then get up and walk to the door.

‘Kazimir... take care,’ I throw at him without turning.

Failure - Episode 22 (MacBride)

'Trying doesn't matter if you always fail.' -Jack Reid

Exchanging with me a 'know it all' look, Pavel winks at me and hands me the bottle.

'When he's had time to take a deep breath or two, he'll realize the shit he's in,' I retort, thinking of Al.

Taking a swig from the bottle, I pass it back to Pavel. We eat in silence, mentally digesting the effects of the buffeting we have just received.

'What the heck is he up to? It's awfully quiet,' Pavel wonders.

'You're right,' I agree.

I get up and head to the other room.

The door is ajar. I walk in and throw a quick look around. His clothes are gone. A nasty feeling of dread wells up in me. I check the bathroom. Nothing there, except the empty bottle of vodka and a damp towel lying on the floor.

I dash for the front door.

Racing out into the street I scan it in every direction. The awful truth is now made plain. Utterly dejected, I head back in to the building.

'Forget it. He's gone,' I throw at Pavel, who's followed me out.

Back in the flat, clueless and deflated, we sit in the kitchen. A new realization begins to dawn on me.

'I have to completely rethink this,' I say, slamming my hand down on the table in frustration at my complete failure.

‘Rocking’ - Episode 23 (AI)

Arriving at *Leningradsky Rail Terminal*, Sergei drives through the security gate and goes straight to the narrow street on the left of the station entrance. Jumping out of the car, we rush to the platforms searching for the ‘Grand Express’, Train 53 leaving to Saint Petersburg.

Finally, we spot its sleek, elongated shape sitting on track five. Hearing the last call for boarding, we hurriedly make for the ‘Premium’ carriage. I grab my laptop and a small travel bag from Sergei and step inside. The train jerks, pulling away from the platform and starts gliding down the track.

‘I’ll text you when I am coming back!’ I cry out to Sergei, catching the last glimpse of his figure rooted to the platform. A female conductor in her gilded red uniform locks the door and shows me to my compartment.

Alone at last, I kick my shoes off and stretch myself out on the red velvet sofa. Settling into the rocking motion of the train, I close my eyes and drift away to the sound of this rail track lullaby.

A soft knock at the door brings me back to reality.

‘Yes!’

The same female conductor who showed me to the compartment comes in and places a tray with tea on the table. I pick up the glass in the nickel holder and take a sip. Ever since I was a little boy I’ve always loved this special brew, served on long distance trains, spiced with adventure, romance, and thrill of the unknown. I stand up and open the washstand. Peeling my pullover off I examine the bandage on my left arm:

‘Looks messy...,’ I mutter to myself.

Finished grooming, I pull the back of the sofa down transforming it into a large flat bed. My laptop on the table, I sit down on the bed. The computer screen flickers and lights up. I go to ‘my documents’ and open a folder labelled ‘bio-fuel investments-confidential’.

‘Let’s see how we can nail you down, Dmitry Voronov.’

Right Move - Episode 24 (MacBride)

‘Tomorrow morning sharp, brief me everything you know on Kazimir. Al seems to have some strong connection with him. Let’s see if we can figure out what it is,’ I say.

‘Sounds good to me, Mac. See you in the morning,’ Pavel nods in agreement and takes his leave.

Alone, I start pacing the flat thinking about where I went wrong with Al. At last, I realize two things. It was support and trust that, in a state of emotional confusion, I so conspicuously failed to give him. I will just have to forget about why he left without a word back then, and trust he will give me an answer when he is ready.

Starting with Kazimir seems to be the right move to make. Getting a sudden urge for fresh air, I grab my coat and leave.

Outside, the grey Moscow winter has closed in.

A stiff wind drives snow in my face, as I head down the street. Every so often, the wind stops and, in eerie silence, snowflakes, like tears of angels, continue to whisper down.

I let my mind wander over the events of the last few days. My thoughts return to Jacques Moreaux, the very proper Swiss. Al had never heard of him, but yet he knew of him, even so far as to have a set of keys to his flat and to know that he had called me to Moscow.

Seeing a local joint open on the corner, I head over and duck inside. At the bar, I order my thinking brew, a single malt scotch *Macallan*. Taking my cigarettes and matches out, I light up and notice the matches are from the *Ritz*.

‘Maybe I can find the Swiss?’

I take my mobile out and punch in the number from the matches box.

‘Mr. Moreaux, please,’ I say to the receptionist who answered my call. To my utter amazement he puts me through.

‘Jacques Moreaux speaking,’ I hear after a few rings at the other end.

Green Velvet - Episode 25 (A1)

Getting off the train, I am greeted by a damp, dimly-lit Saint Petersburg morning. 'Moika 22, please,' I say, slipping into one of the many taxis waiting in front of the station.

The morning traffic is picking quickly up, as we drive along *Nevski Prospect*. Turning onto *Moika Street*, running along the canal of the same name, we stop in front of the nineteenth century *Basil von Witte* mansion, now home to an elegant *Kempinski Hotel*.

Entering the brightly lit lobby, I'm immediately enveloped by its sophisticated yet welcoming atmosphere and impeccably friendly service. I pass my travel bag to the porter who takes me to my room.

In the room, I take my coat off, place it on a hanger and walk to the bed. Tossing my travel bag onto the naval themed cover, I begin unpacking.

'Sergei did a good job...' Carefully layered between sheets of tissue paper are my red cashmere sweater, a couple of white shirts, a pair of navy-blue jeans, tux trousers, and my all favourite dark-green velvet jacket.

I put all the clothes away in the chestnut wardrobe.

Walking into the bathroom, I turn the tap, letting water stream into the bathtub, then take my phone out and scroll through contacts. Finding the name, I make a call.

'As usual *Beau Rivage*, 7pm?' I say.

I hear an enthusiastic 'yes'. Satisfied, I disconnect.

Back in the bathroom, I undress and sink into the foamy scented water, letting it to envelope my body in a sensual embrace.

Moreaux - Episode 26 (MacBride)

‘Mr. Moreaux, this is MacBride,’ I say into the phone.

‘Monsieur MacBride, I’ve been expecting your call,’ I hear at the other end. ‘How is Mr. Al doing?’

Ignoring his question, I go right to the bottom of the matter.

‘You supposedly gave me a note from him with the keys to his flat. The note wasn’t his. He says he’s never heard of you.’

‘Yes, he doesn’t know me, but he does know my employer. I assure you...’

‘How can you possibly assure me?! Especially since apparently you seem to have known my movements since before I even arrived in Moscow?’

‘Monsieur MacBride! I understand you don’t trust me. In fact, my employer and I both want to protect Mr. Al. He’s in extreme danger, his life is at stake.’

‘If you and your employer, whoever he is, wanted to help Al, then why haven’t you done so?’ I retort sarcastically.

‘We’ve been trying to get to him but...,’ he begins then pauses and adds, ‘as to having the keys, they belong to a certain Mr. Kazimir.’

I say nothing.

‘He is very unreliable, mixed up in a lot of things. A few nights ago, when he arrived at the 911, we arranged for his pockets to be searched. This is how we came by the keys,’ he continues.

‘And? What’s any of this have to do with you?’

‘Monsieur MacBride, we don’t have much time. We know Mr. Al has gone missing again. You should find him before it’s too late. I must emphasize, he’s in grave danger.’

‘If you’re so knowledgeable and aware of everybody’s movements why don’t you find him yourself?’ I throw at him.

‘Our people are scouring the city. There’s no sign of him. We suspect he has left town.’

‘Mr. Moreaux! I’ve absolutely no reason to trust you!’

‘Well, I have a suggestion for you, Monsieur MacBride. Start with Kazimir. Should you need to contact me I will be staying here at the *Ritz*.’

‘I wouldn’t hold your breath,’ I respond and disconnect.

No Tricks! - Episode 27 (Al)

'I know you're out there somewhere, moving in another direction.' – *'I'm Ready'* by Chevelle

Soaking in the bath, my eyes closed, I savour the moment of peace and weightlessness.

My mobile rings. I pull myself up and grab the phone from the tiled floor. *'Kazimir...'*

I let the phone ring twice more, then answer his call.

'Al, I booked you on the flight tomorrow evening. Andrei will be at the airport to take you to the lodge. And...,' he adds with metallic notes in his tone, *'don't play any tricks on me.'*

The line crackles, as I absorb his words.

'Al!' He barks into the phone.

'I will be there, Kazimir, no tricks,' I reply.

'Good!' He spits into the phone and disconnects.

Arriving at the downstairs restaurant, I throw a quick glance around candle-lit tables. She's not here yet.

I follow an immaculate waitress to a table, take a seat and order a glass of champagne. It arrives swiftly, tiny bubbles rushing to the surface in the shimmering candlelight of my table. Raising the glass, I take a sip. Simultaneously, I am greeted with a kiss on the top of my head and a familiar whiff of *Coco Chanel Mademoiselle*.

I turn around to face Boneur. As she takes her seat at the table, I admire her long mermaid-like hair streaming over her shoulders and down the back of her off-white dress.

'How are you, my sweet?' she asks, sitting down.

'You are late...'

'Oh, it wouldn't be me if I weren't late.'

We laugh and order more champagne.

I fill her in, as she listens attentively, an occasional frown crossing her forehead.

'Chéri, are you sure you want to go to that lodge of his?'

'This can be lots of fun, don't you think?' I wink at her.

She eyes me disapprovingly.

‘Let’s order more champagne, go up to my room, and discuss the details,’ I suggest, placing my hand over hers.

‘You are playing with fire, Al!’

On A Hunch - Episode 28 (MacBride)

Seated in the kitchen, we munch on croissants and coffee.

‘Okay Pavel, what do you know that can lead us to Kazimir?’

‘I did some checking around,’ he replies, brushing crumbs off his sweater, ‘what I’ve found out is that Kazimir owns a hunting lodge near the village of Fiskars in Finland that he frequents. On a hunch I had a contact check the airlines, see if he might be flying there soon. And, he’s on a flight to Helsinki leaving tonight.’

On the plane seated in ‘first’, Kazimir appears to spend his time reading magazines. Tall and lean, dressed in a bespoke business suit, he looks the very model of a well-healed businessman.

Arriving at Helsinki Vantaa Airport, he exits the plane and heads quickly for the arrivals hall. Outside, at the curb, sits a black H1 Alpha Hummer with enormous knobby wheels.

Greeted by a man with an orange scarf ablaze at his throat, Kazimir mounts the ostentatious machine and they quickly drive away. Soon, another 4WD vehicle pulls up. Behind the wheel sits a burly Finn, a watch cap covering his blond hair.

‘Mac, this is Timo, a retired Finnish Secret Police officer. We used to work together,’ Pavel makes the introductions.

As the huge Hummer lights up the night sky in front of us, heading west towards Fiskars, we discuss our plan.

‘Tell me more about this hunting lodge of his,’ I ask Pavel.

‘The lodge is set at the right end of a large field close to the woods, down a well-maintained dirt road. Satellite photos show there are several outbuildings. As far as we know, maybe four or five people, except during his hunting parties, are there at any time. His nearest neighbour is over four kilometres distant. Obviously, given the nature of the lodge there are plenty of arms. He has excellent communications, including a satellite hook-up. He’s usually there no more than a couple of days at a time.’

After an hour of hard driving, the beacon to Russian kleptocracy abruptly slows, turns off the main road and disappears rapidly, in a halo of light and a hurl of stones.

‘Better not follow him down the road to the lodge,’ I say. ‘Timo, you stake out the entrance in case of additional visitors. Pavel, we’ll hike in following the road using the woods for cover.’

Hummer - Episode 29 (AI)

Waking up to another dim winter morning, I look around the hotel room. Seeing four champagne bottles scattered by the writing desk, I moan, roll over and bump into Boneur, who is curled up on the other side of the bed.

I slip quietly out of bed and head to the bathroom. On the way, I stumble over Boneur's feathery shoes dropped carelessly on the floor.

'*Exotic bird...*' I smile to myself, picking them up.

As I brush my teeth, I think of the lodge '*rendezvous*' with Kazimir. Perhaps, Boneur is right. I am too reckless. Back in the room, I throw a glance at Boneur, still fast asleep, her black 'mermaid' locks spread on the sheets.

I dress, pack my bag and write a note for her.

Strolling along *Nevski Prospek* past numerous boutiques and restaurants I feel an urge for a 'Soviet' vanilla ice cream. I find a street stall and ask a seller, all bundled up in layers of clothes, for a '*plombir*'. A typically deformed waffle cup in my gloved hand, I start licking its frosty cream top. My tongue immediately goes numb.

Landing at *Helsinki Vantaa Airport*, I head straight to passport control and having only hand luggage, proceed immediately to the arrivals hall where Andrei waits for me, an exotic orange scarf ablaze at his throat.

'*What is it with all these people who work for Kazimir?*' I think, intrigued by the colour of his scarf.

Not a word exchanged, we walk out of the terminal into the freezing night and wait at the curb. Kazimir's black H1 Alpha Hummer pulls up in front of us. Getting inside, I notice I am not the only one in the back seat.

'Just wanted to make sure you got the personal touch on arrival,' Kazimir says, grinning at me from the darkness.

'*You would, wouldn't you!*' I mutter under my breath.

Gone Mad - Episode 30 (A1)

We drive in silence.

Finally, the Hummer slows down, turning off the main road. As soon as it stops in front of the brightly-lit main lodge, Kazimir bolts out, slamming the car door. Andrei drives on toward the guesthouse.

I get out of the Hummer and follow him into the building. He switches the lights on and shows me around. Entering the bedroom, he places my travel bag on the bed, and waves me good-bye. As he leaves, I lock the door behind him and search the lodge for bugs and hidden cameras.

'You never know with this mind-twisting bastard!'

Drawing all the curtains closed, I unpack and go to the living room.

The room is pleasantly warm. I stretch out on the huge polar bear rug by the fire. Listening to the crackling of burning wood, I watch the flames lick the bricks of the fireplace, their passionate dance reflecting in my eyes. In a while, I take my laptop out and then, picking up my mobile, I punch in Kazimir's number. Listening to the long rings at the other end, I wait. Finally, he answers.

'Yes!' He barks into the phone.

'Are you still up?'

'Al, what the fuck is it?'

'Shall we talk about Voronov?'

'Voronov? Have you gone mad, it's midnight! See you at my lodge in the morning.' He disconnects, as abruptly as he has connected.

Lying face up on the rug, I stare unblinking at the wood panelling of the ceiling.

Chapter 4: Hunt

‘Bastard!’ - Episode 31 (MacBride)

‘H1 turned onto main road, heading east towards Helsinki.’ Timo checks in on the radio.

Moving slowly forward we stay close to the dirt road. Coming upon a large clearing, home to the lodge, we stop and scan the area from the edge of the woods. All seems quiet. Lights are on in the main building.

Reaching a woodshed with a good view of the lodge we unload our equipment and set up a portable IMSI catcher. Fired up, the machine immediately sniffs out an active handset. Using the IMSI ID numbers we turn the phone into a bug ready to pick up any conversation nearby.

An alert comes on.

‘The plane’s landed. We’ll return in an hour. Set ‘Moose’ lodge up for our visitor.’

A man walks from the main lodge to a smaller building on our left. Lights come on and smoke starts pluming from the chimney.

After what seems like an eternity the radio crackles on.

‘H1 turned onto the dirt road.’

Tearing out of the night the Hummer makes an abrupt halt in front of the main lodge. A man bolts out of the car and heads into the house. H1 moves on stopping at the next building.

A man in a long black coat steps out. As he walks to the lodge I instantly recognize him.

‘It is Al!!’

‘Bastard!’ bursts into my mind as the unexpected sight of him overloads my limbic system.

Buzz - Episode 32 (MacBride)

Recovering from the initial shock of seeing him staying in Kazimir's pad I turn to the IMSI catcher's screen: four mobile phones are now active.

The night air buzzes quietly as we tune in to the sounds picked up by the phones. Jumbled at first, we strain to make out anything distinct: mostly people moving around, there's a TV on somewhere, some dishes clink. A phone dials.

'Yes!' Spits into the air.

'Kazimir...' Al begins.

'Al's calling him!' *What the fuck?!* I am stunned.

A name 'Voronov' thrusts into the conversation. '*Dmitry Voronov?!*' I glance at Pavel staring forward, his breath steams in the cold night air.

Suddenly '*Bastard!*' erupts violently cutting through the general static.

Kazimir's phone shuts down.

The IMSI catcher goes silent.

'Mac, have a break, I'll take the first watch.' Pavel says as we shift uncomfortably in the cramped space between the woodpiles.

My back against the cold wood I try unsuccessfully to rest but my mind stays maddeningly occupied by thoughts of Al, Kazimir, their wheeling and dealing...

Morning slowly dawns. The IMSI jumps to life: the staccato sound of someone dialling drills through the silence of the cold morning air. It's Kazimir. Momentarily another phone rings. It's Al's.

Soon, walking with a laptop he enters the main house.

The conversation starts. Voronov again, some bio-fuels connection, a dismissive demand for 51%.

Kazimir walks out and drives away in his Hummer.

Stake - Episode 33 (AI)

A telephone rings echoing in my head. Waking up, I answer the call.

‘Aren’t you up yet?’ Kazimir barks into the phone.

‘Good morning to you too!’

‘I’ll meet you in half an hour at my lodge.’ He orders and disconnects.

‘*Kozel!*’

I drag myself out of bed, splash some water on my face and quickly get dressed.

Not bothering with my coat, I collect my papers, grab the laptop, and step out of the lodge. Walking along a narrow path covered with a thin layer of fresh snow I inhale the cold morning air.

Arriving I bump into Andrei in the hall. He shows me to the dining room. At the far end of the huge wood table Kazimir sits sharing his undivided attention with his porridge. A monogrammed china tea service is set for two.

I take a seat at the other end and help myself to a black tea with lemon. Sipping it, I stare at an imposing icon above Kazimir’s head. The awkward silence lingering around us is getting on my nerves.

‘Kazimir, shall we talk about the Voronov case?’ I venture.

‘Yes, go on,’ he mutters still focused on his porridge.

‘I’ve gone through the information you sent me and have a short report on his bio-fuels investment portfolio highlighting the areas that might be of interest to you,’ I say, pushing a file towards him.

‘There’s only one area of interest to me,’ he says without glancing at the file, ‘51% of his stake.’

‘Kazimir, why on earth would you want a 51% stake in his bio-fuels portfolio?!’

‘And *that* is none of your fucking business!’ He spits out.

Falling silent, I look for the answer in my cup.

Winding Path - Episode 34 (AI)

As Kazimir leaves, Andrei comes into the breakfast room. His orange scarf flashes annoyingly before me.

Eyeing me from behind his thick dark eyebrows, he selects an apple from a large glass vase and begins to peel it. Finished, he quarters it and drops the pieces into his mug. The subtle aroma of warm apple releases into the air, as he pours hot tea over them from a monogrammed pot.

I can't get my eyes off his scarf.

'How are you, Al? Haven't seen you here for a while,' he looks at me, taking a slurp.

'Quite fine...thank you...'

'What I've always admired about you is your endurance. I often wonder what a man like you has in common with... a man like Kazz.'

'I often wonder too, but I'm afraid the answer escapes me.'

We fall silent.

'See you later. I am going for a walk,' I say, standing up.

Coat on, I grab my mobile and fur gloves and step out into a bright, crisp winter morning.

Passing the main lodge and adjoining buildings, I turn left by the woodshed and enter the woods. Following a narrow path winding between tall pines that reach out to me with their snow-laden branches, I reflect on my conversation with Kazimir.

I've been through dozens of situations like this one and always completely in control of the game, yet, this morning, his reaction caught me off guard. Have I gone too far?

I feel a burning urge for a cigarette.

Got'ya! - Episode 35 (MacBride)

Al appears and heads down a path into the woods.

I wait then, signalling Pavel my intent, quickly set out after him. At the edge of the woods I join the path following his tracks clearly visible in the new snow.

Rounding a sharp turn that cuts through a thick stand of trees I almost bump right into him. He just stands there glaring at me with his intense blue eyes.

‘Mac! What the fuck!’

‘Damn you Al! Sometimes, you’re too fucking proud for your own good. Let’s face it, you maybe have bitten off more than even you can chew.’

‘What makes you so smart all of a sudden?’

‘If I didn’t know you better, I might be forced to think you’re just a stupid crazy son of a bitch. First, you call me for help, then I find you mixed up with this sleaze-bag Kazimir...’

‘Shut the fuck up, Mac!’

Raising my arm, I take a step forward. He doesn’t move, just stares at me daring. I take a deep breath and step back.

Gun - Episode 36 (Al)

'Mac, I don't think you know me,' I say, looking straight into Mac's eyes.

'Al, I came here because *you* asked me.'

'And?'

'And what I've gathered so far is that you could do with some help.'

'I see!' I note sarcastically, 'I did call for you, I had my reasons, but that's all changed now. I have to be alone in this.'

'Al!' Mac yells, 'cut this '*I need to be alone*' crap already. That went out of style years ago with Marlene Dietrich.'

'That '*crap*' as you call it is timeless!' I retort.

Mac quickly moves forward and makes a grab at my throat. I try to draw away but he tightens his grip.

'Back off, man!'

Releasing me, Mac turns around. Behind us, Andrei stands a gun in his hand.

'Damn it!' I swear under my breath.

'Do not move!' Andrei orders. 'Who the hell are *you*?' he enquires addressing to Mac.

Searching his pockets, he removes a gun.

'I'm an old friend of Al's!'

'What a charming way for a friend to behave.' Andrei remarks.

'Al, tell him!' Mac pleads, 'tell him this is a mistake!'

'I've never seen this man before!' I say.

Still pointing his gun at Mac, Andrei moves his eyes from me to Mac and back, hesitating.

We remain silent.

Our silence is shattered by a gunshot. Andrei's face twists with pain. Dropping his gun, he falls on his knees and grabs his thigh.

'Fuck!' I cry out.

Damn it! - Episode 37 (AI)

Rooted to the ground I stare at Andrei kneeling, blood spreading quickly into a large stain around him.

Shooting a quick glance at Mac, I grab his gun from the snow and throw it to him.

He just stands there transfixed.

‘Go! Now!’ I shout, motioning Mac to leave.

Turning to Andrei, I get down in front of him.

‘Andrei, let’s keep what has just happened between two of us. Don’t say a word of this to Kazimir.’

‘Go get help!’ He orders.

I dash toward the lodges, my feet sliding in the snow. Reaching a clearing I spot one of the Kazimir’s men smoking beside the main building.

‘Call for an ambulance! Andrei’s been shot in the leg!’ I cry out, as I run towards him.

Andrei remains silent all way to the ambulance. They wheel him in, shut the door and drive away, the maddening siren echoing in the woods.

‘*What a mess!*’ I swear to myself, as I walk back to my lodge.

Inside, my coat on, I sit down on the sofa and stare intently forward. My hands, still covered in blood, are trembling. I slump forward burring my face in them.

My mobile gently vibrates in the pocket. Taking it out I look at the screen.
Boneur...

‘Hey my sweet! How’s it going up there?’ She intones into the handset.

‘*Chéri*, can’t be better! We are in deep shit!’ I resound.

‘*Merde!* What’s happened?’

‘I’ll fill you in later. Can you please get in touch with Georgina? I need her help.’

‘I’m not sure where she is right now. She could be anywhere, but most likely dropping a quick fortune in Vegas!’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised!’ I reply.

Honey - Episode 38 (A1)

Taking my coat off, I walk to a sauna room and turn the heat on.

Back in the living room, I finger through the bottles standing on a console table by the fireplace and pick out my favourite *Bombay Sapphire*. Pouring some in a crystal glass, I take a few mouthfuls. The gin is strangely having little effect.

'Fuck you Mac!'

Sauna ready, I undress, dropping my clothes as I go, and head in. I lie down on a lower bench. The heat quickly warms my skin, penetrating deeper, relaxing my muscles.

Grabbing honey cream from the bench above, I apply it, rubbing gently into my arms and legs. The sticky substance melts, releasing its sweet scent. As the honied sweat slowly drips down, my body glistens in the twilight of the sauna.

Standing in the shower, I hear my mobile ringing but I ignore it. Done, I walk into the living room and lie down on the bear rug by the fire. The phone rings again...

I hear a soft knock at the door.

'Yes!' I shout.

One of Kazimir's men appears in the doorway of the living room.

'Kazimir is waiting for you in the main lodge,' he says, looking somewhere above my head then leaves.

Rolling onto my stomach, I press my cheek against the thick white fur of the rug and close my eyes.

Taste of Wine - Episode 39 (A1)

With Kazimir nowhere to be seen I plunge into one of the burgundy sofas in his reception room and reflect on my situation.

'I'll play it by ear...' I decide.

I hear footsteps. Kazimir enters the room and throws a quick glance at me. Opening the humidor, he selects a cigar and sits down on the opposite to mine sofa.

'Will you enlighten me on what happened with Andrei this morning?' He says, as he chops off the cigar tip.

'Well, I really have no idea. I was in the woods walking, thinking of how to get you 51% of Voronov's portfolio... and the next thing I know Andrei's lying on the path with a wound to his leg.'

I fall silent, studying his face.

'Right...,' he stands up and approaches the sofa I'm sitting on.

His black eyes fastened on mine, he lights his cigar. Inhaling deeply, he hands it to me. I take his cigar and bring it to my lips. He sits down next to me.

As I have the first puff, one of his attendants walks in, announcing that dinner is served. I hand the cigar back to Kazimir. We stand up and proceed to the dining room where the table is set for two. A large candelabra with fiercely burning candles towers in the middle of it.

As we take our seats at the table, an awkward silence spreads over us. Having no intention of breaking it, I thoughtfully chew on the reindeer slice that I've just put into my mouth.

'So, how are you going to get me my 51% of Voronov's portfolio?' Taking a sip of red wine from his crystal glass, Kazimir finally utters.

I eye him for a moment then stand up and walk towards him.

'Al... What the fuck? I just asked you a question?'

He slowly puts his wine glass down and watches me approach him. With every step I make, his eyes seem to grow wider.

‘Short Squeeze’ - Episode 40 (MacBride)

He who sells what isn't his must buy it back or go to pris'n. -Daniel Drew, bankrupt New York financier 1830's.

I throw the last look at Al, and Andrei's kneeling in the pool of blood, and head off the path into the woods. Weaving through the trees, I make my way to the woodshed. Suddenly, Pavel steps out in front of me.

‘We need to get out of here! Now!’ He whispers, gripping me firmly by the arm.

Taxing back from *Domodedovo* airport I struggle against the sudden feeling of sadness as thoughts of Al hover in the background.

‘Pavel! I could do with a really good hamburger!’ I say.

‘The Starlight Diner in Pushkin Square, please,’ Pavel instructs the driver.

Seated across from each other in a shiny, classic 24 hour American diner, we stare silently at two ‘Really Big Shawn Burgers’ placed triumphantly above a pile of chili-cheese fries.

‘There's really only one way to get the 51% Kazimir wants,’ I break the silence.

‘Go on!’ Pavel responds.

‘Stock manipulation.’

‘When Al and I used to work together we did this all the time. Through a series of shell companies Al will accumulate shares in Voronov's Bioylinvest Holdings company. At the same time, he'll seed a campaign of disinformation about Bioyl, questioning its prospects, its management, and its honesty. The stock will fall making it cheap for Al to amass a controlling interest for a song.’

‘But how will you stop him?’ Pavel asks.

‘I'll work together with Voronov. With his billions and the secret support of my green investment fund Verdigris we will start buying and make the price rise!’

‘He'll recognize soon that his original plan won't work,’ I go on.

‘Then he'll need a plan B,’ Pavel intones.

‘And, that's where the real fun begins,’ I say.

‘He'll tell Kazimir he must sell his Bioyl shares, take the profits, and recycle them into a bet. The stock price will drop. This is called shorting a stock.’

‘So, when you short a stock if the price falls you make money, but if the price rises you lose money, right?’ Pavel asks.

‘Yes, exactly,’ I respond.

‘So, he’ll go short expecting the price to fall. But, using various techniques I’ll prevent the price drop. Thus, implementing what’s known as a ‘*short squeeze*’.

Chapter 5: Duplicity

Son of a Bitch - Episode 41 (AI)

I move my face close to Kazimir's and stare unblinking into his black eyes. Unable to keep my gaze, he quickly grabs my arm and twists it, making me flinch.

'You... Son of a bitch!' he hisses, hot breath on my face.

'The game has barely started and you're already so wound up!' I say, a sly smile on my face.

'In your case this game never seems to bloody stop!' He throws at me, tightening his grip.

'All right, all right! Consider the deal done and delivered. Nothing to worry about, trust me!'

'Oh, I trust you, like I trust myself! I fuck people out of their money and you... you fuck with their brains!' He shoves me away and starts pacing the room.

Unruffled, I go back to my seat and fill my glass with wine.

'How's that friend of yours, MacBride doing? My people saw him snooping around here. What, this part of your plan too?'

'Kazz, leave him out of this!'

'What the fuck you need him for?'

'I said drop it!' A metallic note creeping into my voice.

We stay silent for a moment. I sip my wine and watch him pace.

'Relax, Kazz,' I say, getting bored with his sour agitation.

He stops abruptly.

'By the way, you are expected at the Ball at *Konstantinovsky Palace* in two days.' He says scrutinizing my face.

'I bet your friend Voronov will be there...'

'Voronov misses none of The Mask's Balls,' he replies.

'No...he doesn't,' I mutter, sipping on my wine.

Bite - Episode 42 (MacBride)

A black Benz pulls into a diagonal parking space, facing the Starlite Diner in Pushkin Square. The driver cuts the lights, pulls out a mobile and makes a call.

Pavel gets up and heads to the mens room. Turning to the window, I stare at my reflection.

Lights on full, a bright red Audi whizzes out of the swirling snow and comes to an abrupt halt right in front. The doors open and the two Russian beauties from the 'O2' Lounge step out. Thigh-booted with their long leather coats streaming behind them the girls stride into the Diner and walk right over to me.

'You're coming with us!' The Dark One announces taking hold of my arm.

'Hang on a minute, girls!' I protest twisting my arm out of her grip.

'Don't be a jerk, Mac. It's in your own interest,' The Blonde says.

I let them escort me out the door and take me to their car. The Dark One shoves me into the back seat and slides close beside me. The Blonde gets behind the wheel. Swerving in the slush, she accelerates and speeds away.

'How the hell did you know where to find me?'

'You're being followed all the time and not just by us,' The Dark One says with a smirk on her face.

'Go on, take a look!' The Blonde grins at me in the mirror. Turning, I see a black Benz coming up fast on our right. Dark and menacing, occupants invisible behind tinted windows, the Benz surges forward pulling up beside us. My phone rings. It's Pavel.

'What the hell's going on?!' He shouts into the handset. The Dark One takes my phone and tosses it on the floor. Suddenly, the Blonde lurches left. The Dark One is thrown on top of me, her legs straddling me. Ripping my shirt open she runs her tongue over my nipple.

Eyeing us in the mirror, the Blonde floors the accelerator, shooting us forward. The Dark One, driven hard against me, clamps her teeth on my nipple.

The musky scent of *Voyage d'Hermes* mixed with salty taste of blood as she plants her lips on mine. Reaching down, she releases me...

As we exit the car under the brightly lit portico of the Ritz, the black Benz slows briefly, then accelerates off into the snowy night. Tossing her keys to the concierge,

The Blonde heads to the elevators. The Dark One and I follow her in. Exiting on the club level, we arrive at room 1112. The Blonde knocks once. The lock clicks.

Faberge Suite - Episode 43 (A1)

'If you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you'. -Friedrich Nietzsche

It's past midnight. Back at the lodge, I start packing my travel bag. Early tomorrow morning I'm flying to Saint. Petersburg. Finished, I go to the window and peer outside.

It's snowing.

I stand by the window for a while, watching big fluffy snowflakes falling silently to the ground. Then going to bed, I bury myself under the huge duvet. Twisting and turning, I try unsuccessfully to fall asleep. My thoughts swirls like snowflakes in the night air.

'One ought not play with shadows, lest they swallow one whole.' He is always lurking in shadows, never exposing *his* identity, never removing *his* mask. A tease of enigma.

I land at *Pulkovo* airport in Saint Petersburg.

Outside, I'm greeted by *his* driver who escorts me to a blacked out Mercedes S500. Inside, on the back seat I find a crisp white envelope containing a monogrammed sheet of paper with '112' written on it.

Arriving, I let his driver go, and enter the lobby of the Grand Hotel Europe.

'112 please,' I say, eyeing a smiling receptionist.

The Faberge Suite, *his* favourite one. The one he always books for our brief rendezvous but never stays there himself.

Swiping the card, I enter the Suite. Shadows of the memories start creeping over me. I wander from room to room, bathing in the exquisite elegance of the Suite, taking in the opulence of shimmering gold patterns of the wallpaper, admiring the delicacy of pink and lilac shades. Walking in the bedroom, I lie down on the bed.

Veiled secrets of the Faberge Suite. Never staying long, elusive as a night shadow he is always gone before dawn.

I get up and go to the window. Spreading the curtains, I look onto the *Arts Square* below with the snow covered statue of Alexander Pushkin in its centre.

'I've seen you,' he enunciated, -

And not in vain you've sent me light:

Not all in heaven I have hated,

Not all in world I have despised.'

Shadow - Episode 44 (AI)

I wait. The light becomes dim. The night slowly claims the grey winter day.

A soft, almost quiet voice starts scraping through the surface of my senses: *'He knows. He's been following you.'*

The drapes sway gently. A figure in a silver mirror-mask steps out of their shadows. The mask covers all of his face. With his face turned to me I can see infinite streams of my own reflections bouncing off the mask's silver surface.

'Do not make the mistake of thinking that he will remain inactive.' I feel the intensity of the voice emanating from behind the mask. The figure moves closer as he speaks but his eyes are still concealed by the dim light of the room.

'I can't see your eyes,' I say.

'Al...', I hear a voice penetrates into my subconscious.

I open my eyes and meet a fiery gaze of The Mask bending over me.

It's dark. I am lying on the bed.

'You fell asleep,' the Mask whispers.

'Did I?' I mutter.

'You had a beautiful dream. A knight wearing a leather coat, long boots and an Arabic skirt, with the face hidden behind a silver mirror-mask, walked into the Suite and said: *'He knows. He's been following you.'*

'How do you know about my dream?' I ask.

My question unanswered, the Mask covers my eyes with his hand and whispers:

'A slow kiss flies around your neck and covers it with silken threads of shadow, weaving silence over you, blackening all lights, sending imperious commands through your veins, so that they may rise in anger and joy all the same, and make haste for war and chaos...'

I wake up. The curtains are drawn, letting the weak winter light into the room. The breakfast is set for one. I catch a glimpse of a crisp, white envelope and a handgun on the night table.

Invitation - Episode 45 (MacBride)

The door of the '*Suite 1112*' opens. Silhouetted in the doorway is Mr. Moreaux's lean figure. Cigar in mouth he greets me:

'Monsieur MacBride! Here, we go again.'

He motions me in, a mischievous smile on his face.

'Mr. Moreaux! Surprise, surprise!' I throw at him, as I brush by and enter the suite. The girls follow me in.

Unruffled by my sarcasm he shuts the door and turns to me.

'Monsieur MacBride, may I offer you a drink?'

'A poisoned one?'

'Do you have such low opinion of me, Monsieur MacBride?' He says, stifling a laugh.

'I've no opinion; you haven't crossed my mind lately. Been busy solving mysteries of Mr. Al!'

'Any luck yet?' He asks, puffing on his *Montecristo*.

Growing increasingly annoyed, I turn to the girls sitting on the plush sofa in the middle of the room.

'What is it exactly we are doing here?'

Oblivious, they stare out in the room.

'Monsiuer MacBride, please have a seat,' Moreaux orders firmly.

Reluctantly but sensing the urgency of the situation, I obey.

Now, Monsieur MacBride, it might come as a surprise to you but we share a common interest. It's Mr. Al. My employer is as keen as you are in finding out what's going on. Have you ever wondered why Mr. Al summoned you to Moscow?'

'Not the slightest idea!' I reply.

'As far as we gathered, you are one of the people he has had a very strong affiliation with in the past. We believe you can cast some light on his past that can help us to deal with him in present.'

'Even if I buy into what you are trying to sell me, why would I share anything with you, let alone your employer?'

Scrutinizing my face, Mr. Moreaux inhales on his cigar and blows a thick cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

'For a very good reason, Monsieur MacBride: your own life is at stake.'

I stare at Mr. Moreaux, his words sinking in.

‘My life’s at stake?’ I echo.

‘We believe Mr. Al will attempt to assassinate you and quite soon.’

‘But why would he do that!?’

‘That is what we are asking you to find out,’ e concludes, and picking up a crisp white envelope, hands it to me.

‘Here, take this. It’s an invitation to the Ball in *Konstantinovsky Palace*. I know he’ll be there. You’ll have to act before he strikes.’

Bonjour - Episode 46 (A1)

I roll over in bed and reach out for the handgun. Taking it into my hand, I study its intricately engraved black body, equipped with gilded control elements. One of its polished ebony grip panels bears a small gold dragon motif. A tease of enigma...

The pistol still in my hand, I get up and come to the table where my breakfast is set. Pouring some tea into a white porcelain cup, I start feasting on the buttery flesh of croissants. Half way through a mouthful, I hear a soft knock on the door.

‘Yes!’ I shout. The door opens and Boneur strides in.

‘*Bonjour chéri!*’ She says a wide smile on her face.

She takes off her coat and joins me at the table.

‘Phew, no coffee?’ She exclaims, studying the table.

‘For now, you’ll have do with the tea,’.

‘What’s that in your hand?’ She asks, pointing at the pistol.

‘A gift...’

‘From whom?’

‘A friend...,’ I trail off.

She shoots a puzzled look at me, but says nothing.

‘Have you received your invitation to the Ball?’ I ask, changing the subject.

‘Yes, I have,’ I hear her reply as I walk into the bedroom and place the gun in the safe.

Whizzing through winter slush of *Saint Peterburgskoe Shosse*, our taxi speeds North towards *Strelna*.

‘Did you get hold of Georgina?’ I ask Boneur as I run my fingers through the grey fur of my hat, resting on my laps.

‘Yes, I did. She arrived last night. She’ll be waiting at the location,’ Boneur replies.

‘She’s a good kiddo, isn’t she?’ I throw a quick glance at her.

‘Yes, a very talented one,’ she replies.

‘And damn gorgeous too,’ I add laughing.

‘*Cheri*, how’s MacBride?’

‘He’s not been in touch with me since that bloody scene in the woods. But I’m not concerned. His phone’s been intercepted since his arrival to Moscow. I pretty much aware of his moves.’

Georgina - Episode 47 (A1)

Our taxi pulls in front of a beige coloured ‘*château*’ – *Konstantinovsky Palace*. Sitting in the midst of iced gardens, the Palace displays a mix of baroque and classical styles. Exiting the car, we stop for a moment to take in the view then head to the Visitor Centre, where Georgina was instructed to wait for us. Blue-eyed, the golden locks flowing down her shoulders, she shoots a dazzling smile at us.

‘Buongiorno, peeps!’

We greet her and enter the building where a fleshy, middle-aged woman with a stern look joins us at the reception.

‘Nina Alekseevna, our guide to *Konstantinovsky Palace*,’ I introduce her to Boneur and Georgina. Soberly she looks them up and down then waves us to follow her.

‘The construction of the Palace started in 1714 by Peter the Great. However, in 1721 the work was suspended as Peter the Great decided to start building a residence in Peterhof,’ she explains.

‘On ascending the throne in 1741, Peter’s daughter Elizabeth intended to complete her father’s project. Her favourite architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli was asked to expand and aggrandize Michetti’s design. But his attention was soon diverted to other palaces, in Peterhof and Tsarskoye Selo, so the Strelna palace stood unfinished until the end of the century.’

During the short intervals in Nina Alekseevna’s fact loaded historical speech, I am trying to discretely instruct Georgina on her job. Focused, she listens, occasionally throwing in a question.

Raising her voice, Nina Alekseevna continues:

‘In 1797, Emperor Paul I presented Strelna to his son, Grand Duke Konstantin who immediately resumed the construction, which resulted in the finished silhouette and modern look.’

‘Following the death of Konstantin Pavlovich, Emperor Nicholas I gave the Strelna estate to his own son, Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich, who undertook another reconstruction of the palace and the park.’

We follow Nina Alekseevna down spacious corridors and enter a magnificently appointed Blue Hall. Throwing a triumphant look at us, she sways her arm somewhere towards the centre of it and proclaims:

'In accordance with a project drawn up by the architect, Andrei Ivanovich Stakenschneider, the central rooms of the Palace were redecorated and given the name: Marble and Blue Halls!'

Madre a Dio! - Episode 48 (Mac Bride)

I take the envelope with the invitation to the Ball offered by Mr. Moreaux, stuff it into my pocket, and head for the door. Signalling the girls to follow me, Mr. Moreaux waves me good-bye.

‘Good luck, Monsieur MacBride.’

We take the lift down.

‘Fancy a ride home?’ The Blonde says, grinning.

I nod and get into the car. Plunging next to me, the Dark One leans over and reaches for my belt. I stop her hand.

As I go back in time, countless images of Al kaleidoskop in my head.

What on earth has happened to him? Part of me not wanting to believe, pushes away the thought of him being capable of doing what Mr. Moreaux had insinuated. On the other hand, a somewhat insistent voice at the back of my mind tells me that perhaps I am mistaken and I don’t know him. In fact, perhaps, I’ve never really known him.

‘Madre a Dio!’

I stare out the window: the reflections of snow, grimed cars and dreary crowds in luxury shop windows, contrast with beautiful façades concealing dark secrets. The traffic slows down.

‘There must have been an accident,’ The Blonde mutters, as we approach a blacked-out Benz, crashed head-on with a small Citroen, a covered up body visible in the driver’s seat.

I turn away overcome by a sudden sickening.

As we drive along *Bolshaya Ordynka Street*, I catch a glimpse of the yellow bell tower of the Neoclassic church.

‘Stop the car!’ I cry out.

What's Up? - Episode 49 (AI)

After an hour-long tour of the Palace peppered with facts and historical details, we finally find ourselves released from the intellectually challenging companionship of Nina Alekseevna.

Outside, breezing in the fresh winter air, we stroll along the iced canals of the Russian 'Versailles' and discuss tomorrow's event.

My mobile rings. I quickly glance at the screen: 'Dmitry.' Motioning Boneur and Georgina to continue, I step aside and answer the call.

'Al?' I hear a familiar assertive yet polite voice of Dmitry Voronov.

'Yes. What's up Dmitry?'

'Are you free tonight?'

'Is it urgent?'

'It's all depends on how you look at it.'

'Dmitry, what's wrong?' I insist.

'Restaurant 'Palkin' at 7pm.' He says and disconnects.

Barefoot, I pace the living room of the Suite: to the window and back past the gilded coffee table and two classic armchairs upholstered in violet silk.

I can't stop thinking of Dmitry's call. I thought we had agreed to have minimum contact during the execution of our plan, yet he calls me out of the blue requesting a meeting. He must have a really good reason for that. Distressed, I strike the coffee table hitting my toe against its elegant leg.

'Oh Fuck!' I stop pacing and limp to the bedroom to get ready.

My dark green velvet jacket paired with a white shirt, and tux trousers on, I get into the ruby black hotel limousine. Softly taking off, the BMW 7 glides along *Nevski Avenue*.

Relaxing into comfort of the heated leather seat, I take my mobile out and punch in a text to Dmitry: 'On my way. C u in 5.'

The car crosses an ornate *Anichkov Bridge* with the *Four Horse Tamers* and stops at number 47.

Ascending the staircase to the first floor, I hear blue notes of jazz streaming out of the Dining Room. A young man dressed in a tightly fit black suit greets me at the

entrance.

‘Dmitry Voronov,’ I say scanning the room over his shoulder.

The young man gives me a quick nod and shows me to the Room.

Impromptu - Episode 50 (AI)

Graciously moving through the tastefully appointed dining room, the waiter guides me to a table concealed by a white canvas screen. Stepping behind it, I find Voronov seated in a purple velvet armchair. His back to the fireplace, he plays with the white triangle of his napkin.

Zdravstvui, Al,' Dmitry greets me, his gold brown eyes glowing in the dim light of the room.

'*Zdravstvui*, Dmitry,' I reply, joining him at the table.

'Glad you could make it tonight,' he says.

'The pleasure's all mine;' I reply.

He pushes the menu towards me.

'I took the liberty of ordering *Veuve Clicquot* for you.'

Enveloped by mellow jazz we fall silent.

'Is there anything you'd like to tell me, Al?' He says, brushing the rim of the glass with his perfectly manicured fingers.

'No...,' I reply, giving him a puzzled look.

'This afternoon, I had a pleasure of meeting your old friend Juan MacBride.'

'Really, and?'

'And we had a very interesting conversation. He's convinced you are the very person I shouldn't trust.'

'Shouldn't you?' I address him with a slight note of sarcasm in my voice.

'I don't know, Al. You tell me,' he replies, watching the dancing flames of three candles in the gilded candelabra.

'Very well then. I met him ten years ago in Hamburg. I used to work with him in his hedge fund. Our relationship was based on our common interest and main drive: making money.'

'What happened then?'

'We made enough money and parted, taking off to different directions. I haven't had any contact with him for the past ten years.'

'Interesting. What's his connection with Kazimir?'

'None as far as I am aware of.'

Our conversation is temporarily interrupted as we place our orders with the same sleek looking young man who showed me to Voronov's table.

‘So, I presume your very informative meeting with MacBride earlier today is what caused our tonight’s *impromptu*?’ I enquire.

‘I quite enjoy our *impromptu*, don’t you?’ He replies, twisting his titanium ring with a small black diamond set in the middle of an open groove.

‘Likewise, Dmitry.’

‘In this case, our plan stays unchanged,’ he grins, pushing a black shiny box tied with red ribbon towards me.

Chapter 6: Ball

Interlude - Episode 51 (A1)

'Keep not thou silence, O God: hold not thy peace, and be not still, O God.'

The myriads of crackling candles throw quivering light onto the theatrical iconostases. In the middle of the Empire-style colonnade surrounded by the exuberant sculpted angels, a muscled figure of a man stands. Censing at the altar, a priest in lavish attire recites the office of the Ninth Hour. The echo of his monotone voice travels around the colonnade, bouncing off its walls.

'My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.'

Back in the Faberge Suite, I find leftovers of the feast that Georgina and Boneur threw while I was absent. On the coffee table I notice an unfinished bottle of champagne with a note attached. Picking it up I read: *'See you tomorrow! Bisous!'*

Walking into the bedroom, I find Georgina lounging on my bed, her golden locks glowing on the pillow. I scrutinize her beautifully composed body for a few seconds then order:

'Off my bed, now!'

She just lies there, smiling at me with her dazzling smile.

'We need to talk,' I say, taking her hand and pulling her off my bed

Unwillingly, she follows me into the living room of the Suite. We settle in the purple armchairs. I pour the remains of the champagne into our glasses then pick up the velvet box given to me by Dmitry Voronov. The red ribbon untied, I lift the lid. Inside, I find a carefully folded, black silk mask, tinged with red.

I throw a quick glance at Georgina, lounging in the armchair, a glass of champagne in her hand, then move my gaze back to the contents of the box. Where on earth did Dmitry get this mask almost identical to the one I am so familiar with? It must be a coincidence albeit a strange one.

Recovering from the initial shock, I put the lid back onto the box and hand it to Georgina.

'Your mask for tomorrow's event.'

Reflection - Episode 52 (AI)

'We're infinite though we don't understand how.' D.R.

A sinuous mask, studded with Swarovski crystals, glares in majestic splendour on the dressing table.

A sleek looking man dressed in black tux is viewing me from behind my bathroom mirror. His brown hair contrasting with the porcelain like colour of his skin creates a stunning visual effect. Coming close to the mirror, I place the palms of my hands on its cool, polished surface and stare at my reflection.

'And there is no play, there is no game.'

I gaze into the ice blue irises mirroring glittering snow, the night sky sprinkled with twinkling stars, and myriads of dark shades twisted in the night.

'There is no game at all.'

I throw one last look at the reflection and head to the bedroom. Unlocking the safe, I get the handgun out.

'He knows. He's been following you.' His words start pulsating in my head.

Welcoming two elegantly dressed, masked passengers into its salon, a shiny black MD 500E helicopter starts its engines and takes off. Hovering over the flickering lights of the city, it heads towards *Strelna*.

In the walled gardens of *Konstantonovsky Palace*, dozens of projectors beam, vividly illuminating its walls and towers. Flowing slowly through the Palace's guarded gates, hundreds of chauffeur-driven cars follow a path of blazing torches leading to the entrance.

Landing on a helipad of the Palace, our pilot kills the engine and unlocks the doors, letting us out. Outside, a caress of frosty breeze on our skin we walk to the edge of the roof. Mesmerized, we silently peer down at the feverish flame dancing off countless flambeaus, reflected in the polished bodies of supercars.

Blue Hall - Episode 53 (A1)

The spell is shaken off, I feel the cold and turn to Boneur signalling it is time to go. She nods, her eyes sparkling framed by the lace mask outlining her face.

We move away from the edge of the roof and walk to the greenish metal door. Behind it, a flight of winding steps greets us. Descending, we emerge in one of many passages entangling the Palace. We walk down the eerie hallway.

As we reach the marble staircase, we are immediately captivated by Filippa Giordano's sensual voice, reverberating out of the wide open doors of the Blue Hall.

Welcomed by joker-rouge smiles of young men dressed in black, we enter the room. Separating from Boneur, I blend with the assembly of masked guests and make my way to one of the bar counters. Champagne glass in my hand, I scan the hall in search of The Mask.

Vivid blue light of the magnificent sapphire chandeliers illuminates the exquisite interiors, playing upon a sea of feathery, silky, lacy, and leathery masks.

Voluptuously arching their bodies, elegantly dressed women converse with men in tuxedos. White-faced joker waiters move swiftly within the crowd, taking orders.

Glancing over the crowd one more time, I abandon my hope and head to VIP areas at the rear end of the Hall.

As I pass a huge stage erected in the middle of the room, a Griffin Mask grabs me by the arm.

'Al, have you seen Voronov?'

'No, I haven't. Why?' I reply, recognizing Kazimir's hiss.

'I need to talk to him.'

'I'll let you know if I see him.'

Twisting my arm out of his grasp, I leave him behind and approach grey silk drapes imprinted with images of Andromeda by Gustav Dore. Separating the curtains, I step inside a dimly lit space.

Canapé - Episode 54 (A1)

'O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?'

In the Palace security rooms, monitors flicker with images fed from dozens of cameras capturing the Ball. One of the cameras zooms on a tall man wearing a silk mask tinged with red. Entering the VIP area at the far end of the Hall, he heads to a Louis XV *canapé* sofa occupied by two masked guests.

Clouds of cigar smoke, mixed with sweet scent of *shisha*, envelope men and women seductively lounging on *canapés*. Throwing a quick glance around, I notice Boneur in her tailed open back dress, engaged in an animated conversation with two men: a Skull and a Lady of Shadows.

I walk towards them, making my way through clusters of bordeaux sofas.

'Cheri!' cries out Boneur, seeing me approach them.

Giving her a kiss, I quickly acknowledge the Lady of Shadows and turn to the Skull. Under the pulsating magenta lights, I stare at the black and white mask, pondering the features underneath. Meeting his eyes, I recognize MacBride.

'What a surprise! Didn't know you were invited!' I say.

'I don't think I need your permission to be invited!' He replies.

'Can you excuse us for a moment please?' I say, signalling Mac to move to another *canapé*.

Ordering more champagne from a joker, I lean against a velvety back of the *canapé* and look at Mac:

'Can you take off this fucking mask of yours?'

'What's it to do with anything?'

'It annoys me, that's it!'

Gulping his vodka, he slams the glass to the table, and rips the mask off.

Happy?'

'Yes. Now, what the fuck are you doing here?'

'And what do *you* think I'm doing here?'

'Spying on me as usual?'

'You bet!'

He orders a bottle of Kauffman Reserve and refills his glass.

Since when have you become a fan of Kauffman?' I ask.

'Since your stupid call, and what do you care anyway?'

'Cut it out, Mac!'

'Fuck you, Al!' He blurts out.

Grabbing his bottle of Kauffman, he stalks off towards Boneur and the Lady of Shadows who have been eyeing us from their canapé. Mac out of sight, I pick up his mask and stare into the Skull's glaring sockets.

Shisha - Episode 55 (A1)

Sipping champagne, I think about MacBride. A son of the IRA chief in earnest, aiming at leaving a trace of good after him, wanting to be worthy so dearly and ending up creating more evil than his pan-Celtic brains could ever labour!

He has always perplexed me with his out of focus perspective on life. Not seeing the obvious, he has always missed the point. A passionate fighter for insignificance, stepping on toes of the powerful in his quest for illusive justice.

'Bloody 'Greenpeace' enthusiast!'

If he hadn't backed up wrong people in his 'environmentally friendly' philanthropic pursuits he would have been in a lot better position now. Having received an IRA training, you would think he'd know better.

'Naïve as shit!'

My train of thoughts is interrupted by a white-faced joker placing a *hookah* pipe next to my canapé. A wide, rouge smile on his face, he fixes a mouthpiece and hands the hose to me.

Inhaling deeply, I push Mac out of my mind and let vanilla-flavoured smoke infectiously intoxicate my body.

The Ball is in full swing.

Multicoloured lights move back and forth, projecting animated patterns onto the rocking crowd, enraptured by electro-funk beats. Crashing against the mass of masked guests, reverberating staccatos send waves of ecstasy through the Blue Hall. On the stage in the middle of the room, veiled strippers in clouds of golden confetti ecstatically twist their bodies to the ravishing tunes.

Leaving the VIP area, I step out on the floor joining the frenzied crowd. Coming in contact with flashes of neon light, my crystal-studded Swarovski mask kindles, casting a dance of vivid sparks around me. Moving my body in cadence with the drumbeat, I merge with the dancing mass of masks.

Hall of Truth - Episode 56 (A1)

'If it wasn't dark in here... if my eyes weren't blinking to that glorious half-death of dreams... I'd really love to...' - D.R.

In the security room, a tall broad-shouldered man in a black silk mask tinged with red stands in front of the monitor; his hands resting on an illuminated control panel. Motionless, he observes the crowd raving in the Blue Hall. As ecstasy reaches its climax, he quickly runs his long manicured fingers across the panel lightly pressing buttons and switches.

For a split of a second, the music stopped and lights cut out, the Blue Hall is immersed into silence.

The lights change, soaking us in a soft silver hue. As the colours of the room shift to darker shades, I suddenly notice the black silk drapes covering the tall windows of the Hall. Looking up I catch my own reflection in a huge domed mirror hanging over us.

Feeling a light touch of fingers on my back, I turn around meeting the eyes of the Lady of Shadows in a black silk mask tinged with red. I take her hand and pulling her close, invite her into my dance. Entwined, melting into the music, we rock, bathing in the warmth of each other's bodies.

'Where is Mac?' I ask.

'Still in the VIP, doesn't suspect a thing,' she replies.

'Is he drunk?'

'Pretty much... I left him in the company of two stunning beauties, quite a pair. No idea where he picked them up.'

'I see.'

As we dance, I throw my head back, looking at the glass ceiling that catches dozens of inverted reflections of Gods, Wolves, Phantoms, Demonesses, Vampires, Ghosts and Satyrs. Among them, I catch a glimpse of Boneur's intricately laced face and Griffin's black eyes transfixed on her crimson lips.

Suddenly, the music ceases, the lights go out, and in the eerie darkness of the Hall a familiar voice breaks the silence:

'Ladies and Gentlemen, Accused and Witnesses welcome to the Hall of Truth!'

'The Pleasure is Mine' - Episode 57 (A1)

'The Mask!'

Trying to discern the direction from which *his* voice is coming, I search the Hall, stumbling past hundreds of faces turned towards me. My vision captures images of Goddesses, Sorceresses, Queens, Huntresses, Demonesses, and Vamps, their glaring eyes intently stare at me from the dark.

Defying their gaze, I continue scanning the room. The doors of the Blue Hall are now closed. The Jokers are blocking all exits.

'He of Many Faces, He of Many Eyes,' his voice flies to me across the room. A wave of murmur rolls through the crowd. Picking up *his* words the crowd recites:

'He of Many Faces, He of Many Eyes.'

My pulse racing, I feel the heat of the bodies encircling me.

'He wants you to know, he wants you to feel.'

His words resonate in the Hall as the entranced crowd moves closer and closer, narrowing the circle around me.

At this moment, a single beam of bright light is shone upon me. My crystal studded mask rekindles and sends countless sparkles into the crowd. Bewitched, the crowd stops.

The curtains of the VIP room sway open and out steps The Mask. Tall, broad-shouldered, his face covered with a black mask tinged with red. He walks through the parting crowd towards me. His fiery eyes attached to mine, glow with delight.

'Glad you could make it tonight,' he says.

'My pleasure,' I reply.

'No, the pleasure is all but *mine*.'

‘Unmask Your Truth’ - Episode 58 (A1)

‘My eyes have seen you. Let them photograph your soul.’ - The Doors.

Stepping away from me, The Mask signals with his eyes to follow him and makes his way to the stage erected in the middle of the Blue Hall. Ascending the stage, he moves to its centre. I follow him. Turning to face me, The Mask motions four veiled strippers in stiletto thigh boots to form a circle around us.

We stand facing each other, inches between us, in a bright beam of light, encircled by the four veiled strippers, surrounded by the oblivious masked crowd.

As we stand motionless, uttering no word, we stare unblinking into each other’s eyes. My icy blue irises reflected in The Mask’s golden fiery gaze. Ice and fire, brilliance and mystery entwined in one.

‘Unmask your truth. It’s His desire,’ I say, my eyes fixed on his. The Mask slowly lifts his hand, reaching out to his mask. Silent, I watch him, but as he is ready to remove his mask, a powerful burst of thunder fills the room. At the same time, dozens of lightning flashes dispersed into the masked crowd. Instantly reanimated, the masked revellers start rocking to the psychedelic tunes streaming from the speakers reciting:

‘Remember, there is no play, there is no game, no game at all’.

In the deserted VIP room of the Blue Hall, the body of the man in the Skull mask is spread out awkwardly on a silk tapestry thrown on the floor; a bullet wound is clearly visible on his temple. His wide-open eyes peer through the Skull’s sockets into smoky space.

On the stage, in the empty Blue Hall, a man in the black silk mask, tinged with red, passionately kisses the Lady of Shadows. Through the drawn black drapes of the Hall the first rays of the winter morning sun cast light on the floor littered with feathery, silky, lacy, and leathery masks lying amidst golden confetti.

Sacrifice - Episode 59 (A1)

'Choose the day and choose the sign of your day. The day's divinity first thing you see.' - *'The Ghost'* by The Doors

It's 6am. I stand in the Blue Hall, my crystal studded Swarovski mask in my hand. The Hall is now clear of all guests. Its floor is littered with feathery, silky, lacy, and leathery masks lying amidst golden confetti.

Approaching one of the floor to ceiling mirrors, I look at my reflection. In the light of sapphire chandeliers, I gaze at my pale face with blue eyes embraced by dark circles. As I thoughtfully stand by the mirror, I notice another presence reflecting in the mirror. It's Boneur. Her mask is still on she looks agitated.

'What is it?' I ask looking at her reflection in the mirror.

'Cheri, have you, ' she begins but stops.

'Have I what?'

'Have you been to the VIP room just now?'

I turn to face her.

'What are you exactly getting at?' I ask.

'Well, there is something there. You should see it for yourself,' she mutters and stalks off towards the VIP area. Perplexed, I follow her. As we walk in, a thick blend of cigar and shisha smoke immediately seizes me in its suffocating embrace.

'Here. Have a look at this!' She says, pointing at the black and white silk tapestry spread on the floor.

I look down and momentarily freeze. A familiarly shaped body of a man in the black tux is sprawled in front of me. The Skull mask conceals his face. I take his mask off.

'It's MacBride!' I exclaim.

'I know!'

'I thought you were keeping an eye on him! How on earth did *this*... how did he end up dead in here?' I say, boiling with rage.

'I haven't the slightest idea! I left him with Georgina!'

'No, Georgina was with *me*! She told me she had left him with some girls!'

'*Merde!* What girls? I haven't seen any unidentified girls in here!'

'Get Georgina, now!'

My mind starts racing. Searching for an answer, I look into Mac's wide-open

eyes. A shiver runs through my body, unable to bare Mac's dead stare I close his eyes.

Pilot - Episode 60 (AI)

Silent, three of us stand over the dead body of MacBride.

‘AI, *this* doesn’t look good,’ Georgina breaks our silence.

‘Oh, tell me about it!’

Falling silent again, I try in my mind’s eye to reconstruct the intricate layout of the Palace. The only way to get his body out of the Blue Hall unnoticed is through the back door of the VIP room.

In a dimly lit corridor of the Palace, a man in tuxedo and two women in evening dresses drag a stiffening body. From time to time, they pause taking short silent breaks then resume their gloomy journey.

Reaching a winding stairway leading to the roof, they stop. The body propped up against the wall, they start a discussion in low voices.

Their muffled conversation soon finished, the man separates from the group and walks up the winding stairs.

A ciggie in his mouth, the heli pilot in a sheepskin flying jacket anxiously paces the roof of the Palace. The instruction to pick up his clients came an hour ago yet they are still nowhere to be seen. Despite his thick jacket he feels a frosty cold penetrating his body.

The greenish metal door leading to the roof creaks and opens. Relieved, he steps towards the door and is instantly greeted by a gun directed at his head.

Straining, Boneur and I push Mac’s dead body inside the helicopter. Georgina is left to keep an eye on the pilot while we finish what we have planned.

MacBride’s body finally inside, I take the place of the pilot and Boneur slides in next to Mac. Our belts fastened, I place my hand on the sidestick and start the engine.

The shiny black MD 500E propels into the sky. As we hover over the awakening city, I peer into the horizon brushed with the pink-rose light of the breaking dawn.

‘*What a waste!*’ I mutter under my breath, thinking of MacBride.

Chapter 7: Voronov

Walled Off - Episode 61 (AI)

Exhausted, still in my tux, I stagger into the Faberge Suite.

A call to Dmitry would be the next wise thing to do, but I discharge this notion for the time being. Walking into the bedroom, I flop onto the bed. Blurred images of the past day's events begin swimming in front of me. Closing my eyes, I drift away.

It is dark.

I lie awake, gazing at the chandelier suspended from the ceiling of the Faberge Suite and think of MacBride. Resting in his tomb, walled off, yet dangerously close to disrupting my plans.

The images of him continue to kaleidoskop in my head: the bullet hole in his temple, his dead stare, his body cemented into a wall of one of the 'under construction' villas on *Chernaya Rechka*.

'*Motherfucker!*' I cannot help but swear.

I take my mobile and punch in Voronov's number.

In a spacious modern apartment, spreading over the two floors of an old mansion, a man lounges on a luxurious white sofa. With his head resting on a red leather cushion, he gazes upwards, scrutinizing the details of an exuberant glass chandelier. Listening to the Baroque melody of '*La Follia*', he anxiously twists the black titanium ring around his index finger.

His phone rings, breaking his uneasy solitude.

Listening to the long rings at the other end, I think whether this is the right move to make. Finally, Dmitry answers:

'Dmitry?' I say into the phone.

'Al?' echoes Dmitry at the other end.

'Dmitry, I need to talk to you in private,' I venture.

'What's wrong?' I hear a note of concern in his voice.

'I'll tell you when we meet.'

'All right. See you at my place on *Millionnaya Street* in an hour.'

I disconnect and toss my phone on the bed.

‘Millionnaya’ - Episode 62 (A1)

‘And it is He who placed for you the stars that you may be guided by them through darkness of the land and the sea.’ (Qu’ran. Al-An’am 6:96-97)

I take shower, get dressed and leave the Grand Europe Hotel.

Outside, throwing a quick glance up at the dark sky peppered with brightly lit stars, I put my fur hat and gloves on and turn left. Frosty bites of wind on my face, I briskly walk through the crisp winter night. Approaching the embankment of *Griboedov Canal* I pause a moment taking in the view of the azure and gold onion domes of the *Church of the Spilled Blood*, then quickly cross the bridge and enter a labyrinth of arch-spanned paths and inner yards leading to the *Winter Palace*.

Reaching *Millionnaya Street*, I slow down to admire the Neoclassical facades of its elegant buildings. Once belonging to the members of the royal family and the wealthy aristocracy, they now house luxurious apartments of a new generation of Russian millionaires, intermixed with the Soviet legacy of shabby communal flats.

Stopping in front of the ‘key access’ gate of number eight, I punch in the code that Dmitry texted me an hour earlier. The gate door buzzes, cricks and slowly opens. As I walk up the dusty, chipped stairs of this nineteenth century marvel, I think of all the men and women whose feet they have ever kissed.

Soon, I find myself on the third floor in front of a large mahogany door.

In the living room of an apartment on the third floor, a young man in a white shirt stands by the window, drumming his fingers on its cold glass. Gazing out on the street below him, his eyes are locked on a figure of a man in a long black coat, unhurriedly moving towards his house.

Seeing him approach the gate, he moves away from the window and comes to the entrance door. He stands there patiently waiting, almost seeing him ascending the stairs, his long coat sweeping the ancient dust of the house.

The doorbell to his apartment chimes, breaking the intensity of the silence. His heart skips a beat.

I press the nickel knob of the doorbell. Almost instantaneously, the door opens and I am greeted by Dmitry.

‘Zdravstvui, Al!’

Did You? - Episode 63 (AI)

‘*Zdravstvui*, Dmitry!

He just stands there, staring at me.

‘Can I come in?’

‘Yes, of course!’ He says, coming out of his mysterious trance.

Stepping inside, I take my fur hat and gloves off, then unbutton and take off my coat. We proceed to his living room.

‘Can I offer you a drink?’ he asks.

‘Yes, sure, Bombay Sapphire,’ I reply.

Fetching me Bombay Sapphire, he pours himself some too and sits down next to me on the white leather sofa. Studying his polished to a gleam *Brioni* shoes, I think of where to start, then go straight to the point.

‘Dmitry, I think I’ve killed MacBride.’

‘Sounds like a fruitful outcome of a professional relationship,’ he says, sounding the least surprised.

‘You see, back in *Palkin* restaurant, I didn’t tell you the whole truth about MacBride. I know him a lot better than I wanted you to believe. We were more than business partners. We were friends. Everything I know about stock and market manipulation is thanks to him.’

‘Good for you! Is it the very reason for our tonight’s ‘*impromptu*’?’

‘Yes, it is!’

His scrutinizing eyes on me, I fall silent.

‘Al, do you think or did you kill him?’

‘I’m not certain about it. But what I’m sure about is that I found him shot in the VIP room last night.’

‘Sounds very reassuring, very, and I’m pretty certain you did not call the police.’

‘Of course not!’

‘What did you do with the... with his body?’

‘I’ve cemented it into the wall of an ‘under construction’ villa on *Chernaya Rechka*.’

‘Well, in this case there is nothing to worry about,’ he says thoughtfully, ‘or is there?’

‘Yes, there is. He didn’t just happen to be in Moscow. I summoned him here.’

And... I'm afraid I'm not the only one who is aware of this.'

The Others - Episode 64 (A1)

‘You are a hell of a jewel, aren’t you?’ says Dmitry, lighting up a Davidoff cigarette.

‘Likewise! Birds of a feather flock together.’

‘Why on earth did you have to summon this ‘pacifist’ to Moscow?’

‘Simply because he was one of the best experts in stock market manipulation and I thought he could be of great help in my dealings with Kazimir. Unfortunately, I overestimated his strengths and underestimated his weaknesses.’

A cigarette between his long manicured fingers, Dmitry leans back on the sofa assuming one of his seductive poses.

‘So, who are these so well-informed others who might raise an alarm?’ He asks.

‘There are two people in particular whom I’d like to keep at bay: Pavel Nekrassov and Mac’s friend Peter Knaus. So far, Pavel’s been actively involved in this whole story. A former OMSN officer, he has contacts in special units all over Moscow. He always takes Mac’s side, and I’m sure he would be far from pleased to find out that I was anywhere near the scene when Mac was killed.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll take care of him, he says, admiring a reflection of the Venetian chandelier on a polished surface of his Brioni shoe, ‘In Russia, there are two types of people: those who live in private jets, and those who live in coffins. I have a strong feeling Pavel is the latter one.’

‘I don’t need any more corpses in this story. One is quite enough!’

Throwing his head back, Dmitry rocks with laughter.

‘Al this is not what I meant! Based on what your friend MacBride shared with me at our meeting, I will be able to neutralize his best friend easily. Pavel will lead us to Peter.’

‘I’m happy to hear that!’

‘As far as I gathered from the conversation, with your ‘pacifist’ ...’

‘He is not my ‘pacifist’!’ I cut in, annoyed by his remark.

‘I know,’ he says, smiling at me, ‘just felt like poking you.’

‘All right, let’s move on, shall we?’

‘So, MacBride has this green investment fund, Verdigris, that he intended to use for acquisition of my Bioylinvest Holdings shares, thinking he will help to protect me from your financial manipulations. God bless his poor soul! Now, I think it’s a good

idea to use his fund as a cover up for our operation against Kazimir.'

'The only challenge in this plan would be Mac's right hand, Peter Knaus. Peter is an international finance lawyer and the one who has access to all his funds and papers.'

'Al, he can't be a challenge for such a pro like yourself; he is nothing but a slightly annoying obstacle.'

‘A Rain Cheque’ - Episode 65 (Al)

Our glasses are now empty, Dmitry gets up and heads to the stainless steel champagne refrigerator. This cutting-edge monolith contains his *Veuve Clicquot* vintage collection, secreted away in separate bottle-shaped slots.

‘Would you like a glass of champagne?’ He throws at me, over his shoulder.

‘Why not?’ I reply, feeling like celebrating our productive ‘impromptu’.

Pressing lightly on one of the refrigerator’s doors, Dmitry opens a yellow-illuminated compartment cradling a *Vintage Rich 2002* bottle. He takes it out and joins me on the sofa.

‘This elegant ‘wine of two faces’ delights me with its wide range of extremely interesting pairings, just like you, Al,’ he says, pouring champagne into our glasses.

‘I was not aware of your poetic skills, Dmitry,’ I say, picking up my glass.

‘Me neither. So, to the success of our enterprise!’

As we each take a sip from our glasses, I lock my eyes on Dmitry, taking in his posture, his clean-shaven face with a touch of light tan, his glowing eyes curiously studying me. A sudden thought crosses my mind.

‘Dmitry, where did you get that mask you passed onto me the other day?’

Placing his glass on the coffee table, he lights a cigarette and leans back on the sofa.

‘Venice. Why? Is there anything odd about it?’ He asks, blowing perfect smoke rings into the ceiling.

‘No, there isn’t. Just curious. It was quite a different type of mask from the ones I have seen before,’ I say and stand up, ‘I have to go.’

‘My chauffeur can bring you back to your hotel.’

‘Thank you, but I’ll take a rain cheque on this one,’ I say and head to the hall.

It’s early hours of the late January morning. The city is still asleep. Free of parked cars and traffic, covered with a thin layer of fresh snow, *Millionnaya Street* stretches in its silent glory all way to the *Palace Square*. Slender icicles, extending from the rooftops, decorate the facades of its former royal mansions.

Passing a mix of shiny, soundproof and old scratchy doors as he descends the stairs, Al pushes the metal gate open, and walks out onto the street. His fur hat and gloves on, he starts walking towards the *Palace Square*.

Cigarette in his hand, Dmitry comes to the window and looks out onto the street. Straining his eyes, he tries to keep focus on the figure of Al that quickly moves away towards the *Palace Square*. Standing there, he follows him with his eyes until he disappears out of his blurred sight.

Knaus - Episode 66

'The true man wants two things: danger and play.' - Friedrich Nietzsche

A sturdy man in a perfectly pressed suit, sits behind a desk on the eighth floor of an office building in the financial district of Hamburg. The door to his clinically appointed sanctuary bears a sign: *Dr. Peter Knaus, International Finance Lawyer.*

His blonde, bushy eyebrows, otherwise in perfect order, are now shot up a couple of inches, giving his face an expression of utmost perplexity. Sitting perfectly still, his hands on the polished desk, he stares out into the room.

The reason for his intense contemplation is a call he has just received, informing him that his old friend and partner, Juan MacBride, mysteriously vanished without a trace somewhere in Moscow. The voice of the man who delivered this sad news, jerked Dr. Peter Knaus ten years back to the time of his first encounter with Al.

There was something disturbingly magnetic about him, something he couldn't quite put his finger on: seeming available yet completely unattainable. To the orderly brains of Dr. Knaus, Al presented a riddle he could never solve no matter how hard he tried.

Every encounter with him was filled with a deep sense of dread and a complex amalgam of emotions: he hated him yet every time fell for his charm. When meeting Al, Knaus felt powerless, tricked, bewitched, stripped of all his will, - all at the same time.

Ever since Al's fateful call summoning MacBride to Moscow, Peter could not get rid of the inevitability of an upcoming disaster. And now, with his old friend and partner presumably dead, his worst suspicions have been confirmed.

To Dr. Knaus, Al was a hazardous man who threatened his otherwise calm, orderly and comfortable existence.

Al Moreaux - the most dangerous, intelligent, and powerful man he has ever known.

As Dmitry stands by the window, still thinking of Al, a sudden wave of tiredness overcomes him. He puts his cigarette out, turns around and stalks off towards the sofa. Dizzy, his vision out of focus, he flops down onto its cool, smooth surface. The room starts swirling around him.

'Al?!' is the last thought that crosses his mind before he swiftly drifts into

unconsciousness.

A Challenging Opponent - Episode 67 (Dmitry Voronov)

The lock on the door to Dmitry's apartment clicks. A middle-aged woman in old-fashioned spectacles, wearing a white-knitted beret and sheepskin coat walks in. Grunting delightfully, she takes her boots off and proceeds into the kitchen, shopping bags in her hands.

Placing them on the kitchen floor, she walks into the living room where she finds Dmitry Voronov, tight asleep, awkwardly sprawled on his white leather sofa. Not being used to seeing her otherwise 'in control' and image conscious employer so carelessly exposed, she freezes in temporarily trance.

In this unusual situation, she suddenly feels a motherly concern for this Nouveau Riche young man, who normally doesn't awake anything but contempt, in her stern, old communistic heart.

Determined, she strides to the sofa and shakes him awake. Dmitry opens his eyes and greets his own reflection in the large, horn-rimmed spectacles of his housekeeper.

He slowly lifts himself up and places his slim, toned body in an upright seated position. His shirt and trousers creased, his face puffy, he throws a dazed look around the living room. At the sight of the Veuve Clicquot bottle and two champagne glasses on the coffee table, something clicks in his head and he instantaneously remembers the previous evening.

He groans: '*Al*'. His obsession of the past six months.

He first encountered him at an event in *Palkin* restaurant. He was there in a company of an elderly Swiss gentleman, whose extensive knowledge of cigars caught Dmitry's attention.

Intelligent, elegant, and confident, Al emanated the sort of charisma that was so rare among the people Dmitry was usually acquainted with. For him, Al was a highly challenging opponent, and a promise of exhilarating hunt.

Yet very soon, Dmitry came to realize that he was in for a long and exhausting chase, as Al was too shrewd and cunning to be easily 'seduced' by Dmitry's usual ploys. An opportunity then arose, which he very much hoped could strengthen their bond. Knowing about his skills in stock manipulation, he offered Al a lucrative deal and employed his services in destroying his old enemy and rival, Kazimir Stankevich. Now, six months later, to his own surprise, he found himself still nowhere near his goal.

Glancing at his stainless steel *Cartier* watch, he finally stands up and drags himself upstairs to take a shower.

Hamburg - Episode 68 (A1)

'It was winter in Hamburg, the first time I came. Just a bright-eyed kid, a rock-n-roll dream...' - Chris Caffery

It was winter in Hamburg the first time I came... just like today. All – the city's parks, pavements, canals, modern dwellings, historic Baroque and Renaissance buildings, the frozen surfaces of the two artificial lakes - was covered in weightless virgin snow... just like today...

This is where everything began... The enchanted realms of my rock-n-roll dreams... It is here in the snow laden city that I, for the first time, felt the electrifying exhilaration of success, experienced the exaltation of adrenaline rushing through my veins, and uncovered the infinite potential of my intellect.

Hamburg... the city where ten years ago I came across the two aspiring testosterone fuelled young men, Juan MacBride and Peter Knaus, who without knowing so became the catalysts of my own ongoing glory.

Juan MacBride... a seemingly promising young man. My first serious business affair. Though a son of the IRA chief, Mac had never been a true rebel, preferring to go with the flow rather than against it. Adopted by his childless, rich aunt Edith at the age of fourteen, he was taken under her protective wings and grew up rich, well-educated and a wastrel, at her large estate in Ireland.

After her death, Mac inherited a large fortune and moved to Hamburg with an idea of starting a hedge fund with his Eton classmate, Peter Knaus.

The enchanted realms of my rock-n-roll dreams...

It all started with a spark. It always does. The spark of my ingenious thinking and unsurpassed energy that fired up Mac's somewhat dubious enterprise. And soon enough, what he regarded as no more than an ambitious start up dream, rapidly grew and turned into a successful business, generating millions. And suddenly there we were at the peak of our 'rock-n-roll' dreams riding on a wave of our first success.

It was winter in Hamburg the first time I came...

And then to my utter disappointment, MacBride hit a wall and announced that as a major believer in pan-Celticism he would now want to devote his life to funding peaceful efforts for the Celtic 'countries' to become independent nations.

'Bloody 'greenpeace' enthusiast!'

I packed my bags and left him to his 'greenpeace' activities.

Deal - Episode 69 (AI)

In a small cosy bar of *Alster Arkaden*, the wood table with a plump rustic candle and some tall beer glasses in between us, I sit and carefully study the face of Peter Knaus. My preoccupation makes him very uncomfortable. He fidgets on his bench and shuns my stare by pretending to be looking for the universal truth in his beer glass.

‘Peter, tell me, does sitting in your office on the eighth floor of that dull building make you tick every morning?’ I ask, my eyes still on his face.

‘What do you mean?’ He replies, rising his blue, watery eyes from his glass.

‘What I mean is: are you happy, Peter?’

‘I think, I’m..., I don’t know...,’ he mumbles.

‘Seriously, what does managing the funds of your ‘Celtic believer’ give you?’

He falls silent, and starts fidgeting again.

‘Do you come every time you invest a bit of cash into some god forsaken nationalistic group, or perhaps you get ecstatic by donating some millions to ‘saviours’ of the planet Earth?’

‘Stop it, Al!’

‘Stop it? I have barely started it! You believe you are making a huge difference in the world, don’t you? Perhaps, I shall illuminate you a little. All you do right now is satisfy the pseudo-chivalrous aspirations of your friend MacBride, a selfish, aimless shit!’

‘What do you suggest me do, then?’ He cries out.

‘I’d suggest you live your life, break free, follow your dreams with a bit of help from the Mac’s green investment fund, Verdigris!’

‘But what about MacBride?’

‘What about him? I don’t think he is coming back any time soon to check on how his investment is doing!’

‘And what if he will?’

‘No, he won’t. Trust me on this one,’ I say, smirk on my face.

A deep line crosses his smooth forehead, he sighs and starts turning his beer glass back and forth, leaving smudgy trails on the table.

Sipping my wine, I patiently wait.

A waiter comes and clears our empty glasses. I watch how the heat of a steady

flame slowly melts the wax of the rustic candle. Dripping down, it forms fanciful shapes on the roughly textured walls of the candle.

‘All-right, what’s the deal?’ He finally utters.

A Cherished Fantasy - Episode 70 (Dmitry Voronov)

In a glass-walled shower enclosure of his modern, minimalist bathroom decorated with chrome fixtures and fittings, Dmitry Voronov stands, his tanned, slim torso is massaged by water coming out of body jets.

Dozens of thoughts simultaneously race in his head, yet there is an outstandingly beaming one that persistently loops, pushing everything else at the far back of his mind: the one of AI.

Happily surrendering, he admits to his most cherished and relishing fantasies about their business partnership. The fantasies he has already indulged in thousands and thousands, if not millions of times before. By now he has perfected each careful step, each purposeful movement, each meaningful gesture in the scenario he finds to be so contagiously seductive – in self-profiting way.

The jets of warm water gently caressing his bodily parts, he closes his eyes, letting his imagination untie his dream one ribbon at a time.

Overcome by an overwhelming desire, he groans and hits a large touch screen of the digital shower control panel releasing a high velocity stream of icy cold water.

A towel on his hips, leaving wet trails on the black marble floor, Dmitry comes to a golden-framed mirror. Standing in front of it, he carefully studies his refined features. Suddenly, an illuminating thought crosses his mind. Grabbing his mobile, he dials AI's number and is immediately greeted by the automated message announcing that he is temporarily out of reach.

A suspicion rising within him, Dmitry contacts the *Grand Hotel Europe* reception desk. He speaks a polite request: asking to connect him to the room 112. An equally polite receptionist informs him that their guest from the *Faberge Suite 112*, AI Moreaux, has already checked out.

Chapter 8: Moreaux

What the Fuck? - Episode 71 (Kazimir Stankevich)

Behind the crudely soundproofed door, Kazimir Stankevich sits in his office, unrest is clearly detected in his eyes. The reason for his unsettlement is a sequence of unfortunate events that have unexpectedly come upon him in the past few days.

Since yesterday, his office building and all the official documentation of his aluminium 'syndicate' *SurLa* have been under temporary investigative arrest by the Tax Police.

All his years in this cutthroat business he has been extremely skilful, even to the point of utmost ingenuity, in surviving 'aluminium wars' over control of the lucrative smelters. He has also been successful in carefully concealing any unlawful dealings or financial operations associated with his companies. Kazimir knew that it would be very unlikely that the Tax Police officers would find anything incriminating in his papers, yet could not get rid of the uneasy feeling that something dreadful was imminent.

In addition to the tax 'raid', some fishy information insinuating his connection to a network of Moscow strip clubs employing under-aged girls, started leaking to the press. He couldn't quite tell where all this shit was coming from, but what Kazimir was sure about was that if journalists paired with tax authorities dug deeper it might definitely shatter his business.

As if all of this was not enough, there was yet another rather perplexing situation: he found himself unable to reach that fucking son of a bitch Al.

Kazimir's recollections of the recent events at The Ball were sporadic and somewhat foggy, but what he was certain about was that this was the last time he saw or had heard from Al.

In the attempt to find Al, he sent his people to '*Pogorelsky*' to monitor his flat. But since his disappearance there has not been any activity of interest there. He remembers quite clearly him saying that their deal is sealed and delivered. '*Where the fuck has he gone then?*'

Despite their hate-love business dealings he had to admit that Al was a hell of a smart and skilful professional. A perpetual and annoying tease to his male ego.

It was in a company of Dmitry Voronov and some Swiss gentleman at one of the cigar evenings in Moscow that he first encountered Al. With any other person in the whole of Moscow it would be a matter of days, if not hours, before they would

succumb to Kazimir's desires, professional or otherwise. The scenario that seemed to fail with Al, since he was in all senses as inaccessible as a walled castle.

'What is it that he really wants?' He often found himself thinking. However, the question still remained unanswered in his head. Sighing, he moves for the phone and dials Al's number. The automated message yet one more time informs him that he is temporarily out of reach. Kazimir dials another number, connecting to his people on *'Pogorelsky.'* No news.

'What the fuck?!' He swears, slamming the phone down.

Monte Rosa - Episode 72 (AI)

'Home is not a location on Earth. It's a dream, an idea, a sensation... It's both a memory and an epiphany. Home is freedom.' - D.R.

In azure skies, the winter sun brightly shines upon the sparkling-white mountain range, running through the western part of the Swiss Alps. A cobalt blue Porsche 911 with a man at the wheel is slowly climbing a narrow, winding road of the snowy mountain, *Monte Rosa*. Reaching the end of it, the car stops in front of a modern glass house positioned on a small plateau. Using the remote control, the man opens the garage door and drives in.

A travel bag on his shoulder, he walks into the pitch-dark hall of the house and disables the security system. Proceeding to the living room, he lifts the metal shutter off a large glass wall and takes in a view of the dazzling mountains stretching in front of him.

Sliding the glass door open, he steps out onto the terrace, its floor laid with solid mahogany. Motionless, he stands there watching a lonely eagle soar high above the mountain peaks.

The travel bag unpacked, I go to the kitchen and start fixing myself some breakfast. My mobile, resting on the kitchen counter, gently vibrates. A text arrives: *'Sera à la maison par 21 heures.'*

I have plenty of time to catch up on news from Moscow and bring all my thoughts in order.

The trip to Hamburg was an outstanding success. It never ceases to amaze me how fallible are those who vigorously suppress their most burning desires in the attempt to fit public morals. In the end they are the worst traitors. All you need in dealings with such people is the right opportunity and a slight push to make them fall.

I pushed gently. That was enough. He stumbled and started his glorious fall.
Happy falling, Dr. Peter Knaus!

My breakfast ready, I sit down at the granite bar and switch on a glossy Plasma. The TV screen flickers and lights up.

In Moscow, the 'witch hunt' on Kazimir Stankevich seems to have successfully taken off. If all goes according to plan, in couple of weeks I can give Peter a buzz and start acquiring shares of Kazimir's aluminium empire. This time around, Mac's

chivalrous investment fund Verdigris will serve a good cause, and for once, even though resting in his tomb, he will be proud of his achievements. God bless his useless soul.

Determined - Episode 73 (Dmitry Voronov)

Though Al's sudden and somewhat surprising disappearance has left throbbing wounds on his male ego, it also fuelled Dmitry's predatory determination. To him, a round lost never decides the final outcome of his victory. Deep in his heart he made a promise to do whatever it takes to get at Al, no matter how exhausting his chase might turn out to be.

Throwing an admiring glance at his own reflection one more time, he proceeds to the bedroom. The towel dropped on the floor, he steps into his walk-in wardrobe and starts dressing.

Al Moreaux, - the name sounded strangely familiar to his ear, yet he was absolutely certain that Al never used it once, at least with him. Up until now, it never occurred to Dmitry to even look into what Al's real name actually was. In fact, he just realized how, enthralled as he was with the development of his ploys, he allowed this simple question to slip his busy mind. An unforgivable mistake on his part, a self-defeating one indeed.

His thoughts turned to Pavel Nekrassov, the OMSON officer Al mentioned in their last conversation. His gut feeling indicated that if properly handled, Pavel Nekrassov could be of great help in locating Al's whereabouts. A call to the correspondent office of Hansa Investments owned by Peter Knaus, where he had the infamous pleasure of meeting MacBride, will be his next move. And a very smart one he admits.

His grooming complete, utterly pleased with himself, he goes downstairs to the dining room where Maria Alekseevna, his left-wing housekeeper, has set his breakfast for him.

In a micro-district, *Kryukovo*, located 41 kilometres away from the craze of Moscow's rat race, Pavel Nekrassov lounges on a sagged, worn out sofa in his newly acquired flat. On the floor, a big jar of pickles stands, where from time to time he dips his hand and fingers out glistening, pimpled cucumbers. A garlic aroma in the air, he delightfully crunches on pickles, while studying the bare cement walls of his living room.

Occasionally, between his crunches and his Ikea inspired interior design mulling, a thought of MacBride swims in. And as it does, he finds himself slightly concerned

since he has not heard any news from him lately. To be precise, he had not heard from him since Mac's meeting with that douchebag Dmitry Voronov, which according to Mac, went fabulously well.

His mobile rings.

A glance at its screen tells him that, fucked if he knows who it is calling, but years working in OMSON taught him not to disregard or ignore any signs, even if completely perplexing ones.

He answers the call.

To his muffled *'Hello'*, a somewhat arrogant voice at the other end introduces himself as Dmitry Voronov. Caught unawares by such generous stroke of luck, Pavel chokes on his cucumber.

Photograph - Episode 74 (Dmitry Voronov)

'A secret's worth depends on the people from whom it must be kept.'

- Carlos Luis Zafon

A short conversation with Pavel reveals that this honoured OMSON officer is completely oblivious to the recent fatal twist in Mac's destiny. Not being in his immediate plans to dissuade Pavel out of his blissful ignorance, Dmitry assures him that he is on their side and in light of recent developments in their plan, he would need to raid Al's residence on *Pogorelsky*.

Not the least surprised by Dmitry's request, Pavel eagerly offers his help, happening to be in possession of the keys to her apartment.

Finally, in front of Al's door, Pavel behind him keeping polite distance, Dmitry pauses, gazing at the big shiny '7B' set into smooth wood panelling.

Foreign to such barbaric acts as breaking into people's private spaces, he hesitates. Then, head throbbing, remembering that it is all for a good cause, even though entirely his own, he commands Pavel to undo the locks.

The door glides smoothly open. Ordering Pavel to stay in the hall, Dmitry closes the door behind him and throws a quick look around. Finding himself standing in the midst of Al's flat, he is not quite sure anymore of what it is exactly he is looking for. His crystal-clear logic tells him that considering what a shrewd man Al is, it is very unlikely he will come across anything of significant importance.

Yet, the beats of his madly racing heart drum a different tune, indicating that he will not be leaving empty handed. He takes a leap and follows the 'drums'.

In the apartment '7B' on *Pogorelsky*, a tall young man in an unbuttoned black cashmere coat thrown over a white shirt strides along the parquetted corridor. His polished *Brioni* shoes creaking, he swiftly reaches the corridor's end and stops in front of the bedroom door. Pushing it open, he walks in.

The shadow of a wind, lightly touching his face, travels across the room, softly sways the white muslin curtains of the four-posted bed. Enchanted, the young man slowly moves around the bedroom taking in the details of this luscious sanctuary. Approaching the bed, he stands there gazing at white silk cushions invitingly scattered on the wolf fur throw. Tempted, he gives it a stroke. The diamond sparkles in his black titanium ring, as he runs his long fingers through the thick grey fur.

A book on the bedside table; a frosty snow-flaked window on the cover catches his eyes. Taking it into his hands he reads the title: *The True Deceiver*... Intrigued he flips through its pages. A photograph slips out. A young man with a dazzling smile and an elderly gentleman are imprinted on its glossy surface, the snowy peaks of mountains visible in the distance behind them. Dmitry turns the photograph over and sees a short note written in a neat round handwriting: *'To my dearest grandson.'*

He pockets the photograph and, throwing a last look around, leaves the bedroom.

Smoke - Episode 75 (Dmitry Voronov)

I do not seek for fame,

A general with a scar;

A private let me be,

So, I have my cigar.

-From *'The Cigar'* by Thomas Hood

Back on *Millionnaya Street*, the photograph in his hand, Dmitry lies on his white leather sofa. Studying the features of the man he knows only so well, he contemplates the note at the back of the photograph.

'To my dearest grandson...'

The elderly man sitting next to Al seems to be strangely familiar. Accessing his meticulously organized memory, Dmitry quickly fingers through myriads of images. Finally, he comes across one that seems to be closely resonating with the face of the gentleman staring at him from the photograph.

Early spring in Saint Petersburg. An elegant evening at the restaurant *Palkin*.

The lingering subtle aroma of exquisite cigars in the air and a very proper Swiss gentleman with an extensive knowledge of the luxurious tobacco trade.

Something clicks in Dmitry's head. He jumps off the sofa, and throwing his black cashmere overcoat on, shoots for the door.

The man in a white turtleneck sweater and a pair of black jeans sits in an armchair on the terrace of the modern glass house positioned on one of the plateaus of *Monte Rosa*.

Beside him, on the polished wood mahogany table, a cup of espresso stands.

A sweet vanilla scent in the air, Davidoff cigarillo between his fingers, the man gazes at the scarlet sun licking the snow-laden peaks of the Swiss mountains. Sinking slowly into the horizon it casts bloody shadows onto the white slopes.

Motioning his chauffeur to stop at number 47 on *Nevsky Prospekt*, Dmitry bolts out of his car and dashes up the stairs to the first floor of the building. Out of breath, he pauses at the landing to compose himself. More or less managing to restore his usual 'in control' mode, he enters *Palkin* restaurant.

On his way to the *'Chess Room'* he throws an abrupt request to see the manager. A coat on, Dmitry thrusts himself into one of the red and black sofas and lights a

cigar. His deep and frequent inhalations, as he smokes, reveal his agitated impatience.

Grandpa - Episode 76 (AI)

'I had a dream, which was not all a dream. The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars did wander darkling in the eternal space'.

– From *'Darkness'* by Lord Byron

The sun now leaked into the horizon, the unfinished cigarillo in my hand, I stand up and leave the terrace.

Inside, the lights off, I listen to the silence of the house. Bathing in the soft darkness, I admire the subtlety of its shadows and silhouettes, then go to the library room. Unobstructed moonlight floods through the glass wall into the room, casting a silver beam on a huge coyote fur rug, spread on the floor.

Placing my cigarillo in the crystal ashtray, I throw my shoes off and stretch myself on the rug. Face down, I place my head on my arms and close my eyes. Gently stroking the light brown fur, I indulge into the magic whispers, flowing out of thick volumes lined up on rows of shelves. Swirling in the air in a fictitious dance, they invite me in and tell me about the worlds full of romantic adventures, outlandish fantasies, rocking passions, and mind twisting mysteries.

Books: my friends, my lovers, my companions. Enveloped by their fanciful embrace, I slowly drift away.

The lock on the door of the house on *Monte Rosa* clicks.

An elderly, distinguished looking man in a sheepskin Russian Cossack hat and a perfectly fitted tailor made coat walks into the dark hall. Pink tulips in his hand, slightly surprised by the darkness, he switches the lights on, then methodically going from room to room, illuminates the house.

Reaching the library room, he pauses at the door and peers in.

'Al,' he calls into the darkness of the library.

Hearing a familiar soft voice, I open my eyes. Silhouetted in the doorway is the lean figure of my grandpa.

Jumping on my feet, I rush towards him. Laughing with delight, as I hug him, he tries to shelter the pink tulips from being squashed in my tight embrace.

'Have you been indulging in your 'dreamland'?' He asks.

'I wonder how you know?' I say, smiling.

‘Al, I am the one who had the pleasure of observing you since you were a kid. Do you really think I would not have learnt by now what you are up to, when you leave the whole house in the dark?’ He replies, passing the pink tulips to me.

In the 'Kitchen' - Episode 77 (A1)

'Good cigar, a bit of whisky and a long awaited catch up? My grandpa says, giving me a wink.

Taking off his hat and coat he hangs them in the hall and leaving a subtle trail of exquisite tobacco mixed with chic eau de cologne behind him, proceeds to the kitchen.

Occupying my favourite stool at the kitchen counter, I throw an admiring look at my grandfather.

For me, he has always been a true role model: intelligent, suave, kind hearted, classy, generous, and chivalrous. His immaculate taste and love for refined things shaped my own appreciation of fine moments in the world around me. His generous and chivalrous heart laid a foundation for my own values that have guided me through my adventurous, yet sometimes feverishly rocking life.

Everything he does has a touch of elegance, whether he is making coffee, strolling along the street on a Sunday morning, or signing important agreements.

Placing two white porcelain cups with steaming espresso and a glass of whisky on the kitchen counter, he sits down across me and lights his favourite *Montecristo*.

'Tell me, how are your dealings in Moscow going?' He addresses me, blowing cigar smoke through his nostrils. Something that I would like but I haven't yet learnt.

'Well, so far, so good. Except, of course, some minor deviations from my original plan,' I reply.

'And, what are those minor deviations, as you call the them, my dear?'

I feel like a school-boy caught lying to the head master.

'Erm, you know, perhaps calling them 'minor' would be an understatement.'

'I see. So what shall we call them then?' He says, his eyes sparkling mischievously.

'Grandpa..., MacBride has been shot,' I blurt out, surprised at myself.

'I know.'

'You know?! How come?'

'Well, the minute I heard about your deal with Mr. Voronov, I couldn't help but follow you secretly to Moscow. I wanted to keep an eye on you, especially so, when you told me you had reached out for MacBride's assistance.'

'But, grandpa! You can't just spy on me like that! I know what I am doing even if

it sounds dodgy to you!’

‘Forgive me please. It’s just that I feel it is my duty to protect you.’

Trying to come to terms with such revelation, I keep silent.

Back Up - Episode 78 (A1)

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. - Bernard of Clairvaux

My grandfather, his eyes full of affection, patiently waits. I don't utter a word.

'Al, I know it was not right to follow you to Moscow, thinking you couldn't pull it off on your own. I guess, I've fallen prey to my own overprotective fatherly feelings or rather grandfatherly ones...'

'I understand. It's just hard for me to come to terms with the fact that all this time you were in Moscow, watching me from the shadows.'

'I'm really sorry. Now, looking back at what I did I see how wrong it was. It was my moment of weakness. And perhaps, if I haven't followed you to Moscow MacBride would have been alive now.'

'What do you mean by 'MacBride would have been alive now'?' I cry out, completely distressed.

'What I mean is that I have been more or less aware of your and McBride's moves since he came to Moscow. In an attempt to protect you I asked my agents to intercept your Moscow number and keep an eye on you. So, I knew you were going to meet him in the Ritz, and when they reported you had been attacked...'

'Right! From bad to worse we go!'

Taking a short pause, he inhales on his *Montecristo*.

'So... I came to the meeting with MacBride at the *Ritz* and passed him the keys from your apartment asking to wait for you there. I hoped he could watch your apartment while you were at the hospital. But, unfortunately, the sap couldn't even do that!'

'I am not the least surprised he couldn't! Motherfucker!' I swear, the memories of the recent Moscow events suddenly flooding me.

'What we couldn't predict though that he was so obsessive about his 'saviour' mission that instead of doing what he was asked to, he would start watching your apartment and interfere with your private life!' He says without going further into details.

'Right! I see! Any other surprises in store for me, if dare I ask, grandpa?!' I respond in complete and utter disbelief at what I have just heard.

Sensing the escalating tension building between us he shakes his head and, falling silent, gives me some spaces to cool down.

'I think I had enough, I am off to bed.' I say getting up and walking out of the kitchen.

Sweet dreams, Al!' He throws at my back, guilty notes in his voice.

A Comforting Thought - Episode 79 (AI)

The shutters down, I lie buried under a thick duvet in my bedroom and contemplate on what my grandfather told me the previous evening. My thoughts divide: on the one hand, I appreciate my grandfather's feelings and the reasons he had when he followed me to Moscow. On the other hand, I struggle to accept that in his desire to protect me he went as far as to secretly hire people to spy on me. His overprotectiveness strangely feels like control even if it was meant for my own good. My thoughts bouncing back and forth, not being able to reach a conclusion, I get up and go to the window. Lifting the shutter, I peer outside: the winter sun slowly rises above the sparkling white peaks of the mountains.

I open the window and let the crisp cold air penetrate the room. Throwing my bathrobe on, I go downstairs with a thought of making myself a big cup of hot chocolate, while the house is still asleep.

To my surprise, on entering the kitchen, I bump into my grandfather. Wide-awake, dressed in a scarlet pullover over his white shirt and a pair of black velvet trousers, he throws a wide smile at me.

'Are you up already?'

'Yes, my dear boy. This morning, I'm having a meeting in Geneva with one of the Sotheby's clients who needs my advice on vintage cigars,' he replies full of enthusiasm.

'Right...,' I mumble and follow him to the dining room where he has already set our breakfast.

Seated across my grandfather, I look at him with a slight annoyance born out of my frustration of not being able to confront him on his recent actions.

'Grandpa... I still have some burning questions I'd like to clarify...,' I venture out.

'Yes, what are they?' He replies, pouring some coffee into his cup.

'Back in Moscow, did your people monitor me and MacBride 24/7?'

'Yes, of course they did.'

'Well, in this case, they would surely know who shot at me on the morning of my meeting with MacBride, wouldn't they?'

'I've been expecting this question. But I must disappoint you on this one. They don't know. What they suspect is that the shot might have come from the construction

site across the road. This is, of course, a pure speculation, as they didn't see anyone on the street itself or in the direct vicinity of your building.'

'I see, what a faux pas on their part,' I reply.

'Yes, indeed. An unforgivable one,' he says, looking straight into my eyes.

A short but intense silence falls between us. My annoyance escalating, I struggle not to burst out. Seeing my agony, my grandfather tries to bridge the gap.

'There is one comforting thought though. Whomever it was they just wanted to warn you, not to kill you. Professionals never miss a target.'

'Absolutely,' I reply, glaring at my grandfather.

'But again, that doesn't surprise me. You deal with high profile 'trash' of the society and more often than not, you come too close to the truth that they would do anything to conceal. Unavoidable hazards of your job...'

***'Le Chat-Botte'* - Episode 80 (Dmitry Voronov)**

It's a damp winter day. The skies are overcast. A tall figure of a young man silhouettes on the *Pont des Mont Blanc* bridge thrown across *Lake Geneva*. His hands in the pockets of his coat, he thoughtfully peers down at the glistening, asphalt-like surface of the water. A solitary black swan gracefully glides near a small heart shaped island covered with a cluster of bare-branched trees.

He stands there for a while gazing at this rare breed of a royal bird then, glancing at his stainless steel *Cartier* watch, turns around and briskly walks towards the *Quai du Mont Blanc* on the north side of the lake.

A taxi stops in front of the cream and sage-green façade of number 13 on *Quai du Mont Blanc*. An elderly, distinguished looking gentleman in a sheepskin Russian Cossack hat and a perfectly fitted tailor-made coat gets out and walks through the twirling wooden doors of the *Beau Rivage Hotel*.

Entering the lobby, he walks across the mosaic hall past the tinkling fountain capped with a rising cascade of marble columns, balustrades, and Romeo-romantic balconies, and proceeds to *Le Chat-Botte*, one of the finest restaurants in Geneva.

In the sumptuous Dining Room of *Le Chat-Botte*, Dmitry Voronov sits at the tastefully appointed table. His aristocratically long fingers nervously twist the salmon pink triangle of his napkin.

The information he received from the manager of *Palkin* restaurant back in Saint Petersburg confirmed his theory on the identity of Al's grandfather. The very proper Swiss gentleman in a company of whom he once met Al, and an elderly man from the photograph he found in Al's flat were one and the same person: Jacques Moreaux.

Being an honourable client of Sotheby's Auction House in Geneva, where Dmitry frequently acquired vintage tourbillons for his collection, he had no problems in arranging a meeting with this proper Swiss gentleman. As it turned out, Jacques Moreaux was a renowned international expert on cigars, whose services Sotheby's employed from time to time to help out their most valuable clientele.

And so, here he is, the impersonation of a keen cigar connoisseur, sitting in the restaurant of *Beau Rivage Hotel* and anxiously awaiting the meeting with Al's grandfather.

Self-conscious, engrossed in his apprehensive thoughts, Dmitry is suddenly caught unawares of another presence at his table. Raising his eyes from now completely creased and twisted napkin, he meets the foxy eyes of Jacques Moreaux.

Chapter 9: The Mask

'Fuck it all!' - Episode 81 (AI)

My grandfather gone to Geneva, I am left alone with my frustration. In an attempt to sweeten the bitterness of my existence, I make myself a cup of hot chocolate. Pouring it into my favourite red with white polka dots mug, I go out to sit on the terrace.

Settled in the armchair, wrapped in a warm wolf fur throw, I sip my chocolate and ponder over what my grandfather has recently shared with me.

The more I think about it, the more I realize that my unease doesn't arise from the now evident fact that he 'watched' me, in his grandfatherly protective longing.

It's now clear to me that my unrest is rooted in the awareness that, due to his 'protective' spying, he might have uncovered more about my private and perhaps even business life than I was ever willing to share with him. Unless, of course, this old cunning fox bluffed me, hoping that I would crack and fill in the gaps for him.

I can never be sure on this one, and having no intention of going into detailed discussions about it with him, I, at least for the foreseeable future, am bound to be confined to the cell of my annoying frustration.

'Let it be, Al, let it be,' I think, finishing my chocolate.

Back inside, I clear the leftovers of our breakfast and go upstairs to take a bath.

In the middle of a modern bathroom a black bathtub stands, a line of sparkling *Swarovski* crystals runs across either side of it. Contrasting with the beech floor and the virgin white walls of the room, it faces a view of a spectacular mountain range visible through a ceiling-to-floor window.

In the bath tub, the body of a man floats, his dark-brown hair contrasting with the azure water. Staring up at the crystal chandelier illuminated by the winter sun, his wide-open eyes reflect a myriad of vivid sparks.

Cocooned by the warm water, I lie in my favourite egg-shaped bathtub and admire the crystal chandelier suspended from the bathroom ceiling. Fired up by the sun, it sends a rainbow of sparks around the room.

Relaxed, lulled by the silence of the house I close my eyes and sink in, letting my body drift weightlessly under the water. A murmur reaches my ears, gently penetrating my subconscious: *a slow kiss flies around your neck and covers it with*

silken threads of shadow, weaving silence over you, blackening all lights...

My neck is encircled with gloved fingers. As the chilling grip tightens the words of The Mask: *'He knows. He's been following you,'* zoom through my mind. Fiercely fighting, I try to break free.

Struggling, I open my mouth, trying to cry for help but cannot utter a sound and wake up.

The room is empty. Breathing heavily, I sit up and come to my senses.

'Fuck it all!' I swear, getting out of the bath.

Twice the Smoke - Episode 82 (Dmitry Voronov)

'Cunning is the art of concealing our own defects, and discovering other people's weaknesses.' - William Hazlitt

'Monsieur Voronov?' enquires a distinguished looking gentleman, curiously studying the features of a well-groomed young man, whose elegant hands are clinging to a creased napkin.

'Mr. Moreaux?' say Dmitry, getting up and reaching out for a handshake.

Taking Dmitry's hand, the gentleman gives it a dry but polite squeeze and sits down.

Finding himself in front of this grey-haired 'fox', Dmitry involuntarily freezes.

Not only he is on shaky ground in regards to vintage cigars he so hastily claimed to be collecting, but he is also not sure whether he will be able to disguise his true intentions in front of this cunning old man.

To Dmitry's eye, Mr. Moreaux seems to possess the same irresistible magnetism, which Dmitry so envied and admired in Al.

After a short hesitation, Dmitry decides that playing it by ear seems to be the right move to make in the present, rather complex situation.

'What can I get you, Mr. Moreaux?' He asks, putting a charming smile on his handsome face.

'A bottle of still Perrier, *merci*,' Mr. Moreaux answers, taking a leather cigar case out of his pocket.

Motioning at a waiter, Dmitry orders two bottles of Perrier.

'Would you care for a *Montecristo*, young man?' says Mr. Moreaux, offering Dmitry a cigar from his case.

'Certainly!' Dmitry responds, taking one of the chocolaty, elongated tobacco bundles. Lighting his cigar, Mr. Moreaux inhales on it and blows out two thick clouds of smoke through his nostrils.

'Well, Monsieur Voronov, I presume my presence at this fine restaurant was requested by you for a very specific reason, was it not?'

'Quite so, Mr. Moreaux,' Dmitry replies, thinking of Al.

'If so, perhaps you would be so kind as to enlighten me as to what the reason is?'

'Absolutely!' exclaims Dmitry, as he tries to remember what it is exactly he so

passionately lied about to a Sotheby's representative, while arranging this crucial meeting.

Finally, collecting his hazy thoughts he ventures out.

'You would surely agree with me, Mr. Moreaux, that cigars are a fascinating subject, and double so because of their respectable, elegantly masculine touch.'

Slightly rising his eyebrows, Mr. Moreaux nods in agreement.

'I've been an avid smoker for years, but only just recently I've discovered the pleasure of savouring a good cigar. To me, it still remains a rather vast and unexplored field, which I'm very keen in learning more about.'

'I'm quite enthralled by your capturing introduction, Monsiuer Voronov, and must admit share similar kind of passion towards this, as you call it, fascinating subject. But, shall we get more specific?'

'Yes, absolutely,' Dmitry agrees and comes to a halt.

'If I am not mistaken it was vintage cigars that you were interested in,' Mr. Moreaux says, helping him out.

'I must confess, I'm far from a pro when it comes to aged cigars, but would very much love to discover more.' Dmitry replies.

'Right, that is pretty much what I have suspected, Monsiuer Voronov. You see, many cigar smokers are often shocked when they try their first vintage cigar, as the general impression is that such cigars get stronger with years. But that is not true, an aged cigar is subtler in its flavour than a young one.'

'What an intriguing twist on the theme...', Dmitry notes, picking up the white menu sheet with a sketch of a cat's eye on it.

Down to Business - Episode 83 (Dmitry Voronov)

Satisfied with the impression he produced, Mr. Moreaux also turns his attention to the menu of this gourmet establishment, that has a privilege of hosting their exceptional meeting.

Carefully studying the list of superb local produce, he makes a mental note that it has the sophistication and creative verve that is sure to appeal to all senses. He smiles at this thought, then makes his choice and puts the menu aside.

Dmitry, on the contrary, seems to still be engrossed in reading his menu as if it was some sort of 'Bible' offering him answers to his perplexing life questions. Finally making his agonizingly difficult choice, he raises his eyes and looks at Moreaux puffing on the *Montecristo*.

Meeting his eyes, Moreaux grins and picks up the thread of their temporarily suspended conversation.

'So, Monsieur Dmitry, are we talking here about the age of tobacco leaves or about the age of cigar?'

'I'd say the age of cigar.' Dmitry replies.

'You see, some amateurs prefer to age their cigars by keeping them in their own private humidors. In this case, the time cigars will rest before being tasted depends on the attitude and desires of such aficionados. The sky is the limit...'

'Sounds pretty straight forward to me, Mr. Moreaux.'

'Yes, indeed, Dmitry. I'd suggest you start with Cuban Corona 1999. A superb cigar, most suited for the smoker who enjoys finding flavour. A real collectable item.'

An immaculate waiter comes and sets plates with their food in front of them.

'And now, Monsieur Dmitry, tell me, what is the real reason for today's meeting?'

Completely unprepared for such turn of events, Dmitry goes into silent trance. It seems he has overestimated his ability to successfully conceal his true intentions. Mr. Moreaux turned out to be a lot tougher opponent to play with than Dmitry had first imagined.

Having come this far, he feels there is nothing to lose except going home empty handed. In light of this, Dmitry takes a leap of faith and opens up his cards.

Back on *Monte Rosa*, Jacques Moreaux unlocks the door and enters a completely dark house. Methodically turning the lights on, he goes from one room to another

until he reaches the library. The door is ajar. He thrusts his head into the gap and peers inside.

‘Al?’ He calls softly. No response.

‘Al?!’ He calls again, this time louder. No response.

His heart madly racing, he pushes the door open and switches on the lights. The room is empty. He throws a quick glance around and notices a white sheet of paper on her desk. His hands shaking, he grabs it and reads: ‘*Gone to Venice. Al.*’

His head throbbing, Mr. Moreaux sinks into the armchair then takes his mobile out and dials Dmitry’s number.

Magnetic Presence - Episode 84 (Dmitry Voronov)

It's early February. The rain drizzles softly onto the red tiled roofs of faded Venetian palazzos.

Lost in the endless twists and turns of the dark, narrow lanes and dead-end passageways, a seventeenth century noble residence protrudes. Entering its courtyard, a man with luminous blue eyes walks up the stairs of the house, his shoes beat a confident rhythm on its ancient limestone steps.

Past the caged candles and potted blood-red cyclamens, Dmitry Voronov briskly walks up the stairs of the *Palazzo Paruta Hotel*.

He picks up his keys and proceeds to his exclusive Royal Suite. In the Venetian Rococo style interior of his room, he sinks into an elegantly upholstered sofa and bewitched, stares at the golden flames hungrily eating away crusty logs in the fireplace.

It's been a week since Dmitry's arrival to Venice, yet his quest for Al Moreaux has been painfully slow. To be exact, it has not moved an inch since Al's grandfather called him, informing about Al's likely whereabouts. To the utter disappointment of them both, none of the hospitality residences given by Mr. Moreaux had Al's name on their guest lists.

Despite this obvious fact, something told Dmitry that Al *was* here, within his reach, just a grasp away. Absent yet strangely present.

As predators sense their prey, so Dmitry could feel Al's magnetic presence in this mysterious city of masks and dark shadows. At least, in the form of short, matter of fact emails regularly sent by Peter Knaus, updating Dmitry on the progress of their '*witch hunt*' on Kazimir Stankevich.

Feeling drowsy, Dmitry stretches out on the sofa. With eyes closed, he momentarily pictures Al, a wide grin on his face. He sees Al's intense blue eyes so close he can identify the intricate details of his irises. He feels the burning heat of Al's breath. Entranced, he stares into his cabalistic eyes, as Al's hand reaches for Dmitry's throat. Opening his mouth, he utters a lingering howl, and wakes up.

Sweat on his forehead, breathing heavily, Dmitry places himself in a seated position and comes to his senses.

'Fuck it all!' He swears, grabs his coat and walks out into the rain-drizzling night.

Bridge - Episode 85 (AI)

'Yes, you will lose your way, but Venice will find you another...' - Unknown

A receptionist calls my name as I cross the lobby of the *Palazzo Paruta Hotel*. Smiling charmingly, she passes a crisp white envelope to me. I take it into my hands and immediately feel the burning sensation of the intentions sealed within its depth.

Back in my room, I walk to the window and parting the veils, look outside. The envelope in my hand, I stand motionlessly, watching the rain throwing its drizzling net over the dark waters of the *Grand Canal*.

In the haphazardly lit street, I catch a glimpse of a familiar looking figure. Elusive as a shadow, his silhouette flashes in front of my eyes, slips away and disperses into the twilight of a twisted Venetian street, marking me with an unsettled feeling.

I turn away and sit down at an elegant writing desk facing the window. Picking up a letter knife, I slit the crisp envelope open. A folded, monogrammed sheet of paper falls out.

Outside, the twilight of an early February evening welcomes Dmitry into its damp embrace. Still under the impression of his recent bloodcurdling dream, Dmitry hastily strides away from *Palazzo Paruta* and into the endless maze of dark twisting lanes and passageways of *'La Serenissima'*.

Deep in thought, he circles the narrow back streets until he suddenly finds himself on the bank of a canal. Spotting a sharp-bladed gondola parked by the slimy embankment, he agrees on the price and buys an evening ride.

The night falls and casts its soothing blanket over palazzos, canals, narrow streets, secret alleys and blind passageways of the ancient city of masks. Smudgy reflections of the streetlights mark the way in the water.

A black shiny gondola glides along one of the narrow canals of the city. A warm throw on his legs, Dmitry Voronov lounges on its cushioned seat.

'The view from the Bridge of Sighs is the last glimpse of the city that the convicts saw before their imprisonment...', the gondolier explains to Dmitry, as their gondola passes under the bridge.

Pondering these words, Dmitry stares upwards at the sinuous arch of the bridge. Crossing an invisible border, the gondola enters the Venetian district of *Castello*.

A man in a long dark coat hurriedly walks through the city's blind passageway. His shoes, hitting the ancient limestone, send reverberating echoes down the twisting streets of Venice. As he approaches a narrow bridge hanging over one of the *Castello* district canals, he slows down. Coming to the middle of it, he briefly pauses and throws a look downwards, meeting the eyes of a young man in a passing gondola.

For a split of a second, he captures and holds his gaze, then turns away and walks off the bridge.

The Door - Episode 86 (Dmitry Voronov)

'I'm a back door man. The men don't know, but the little girls understand...' – From *'Back Door Man'* by The Doors

'Stop! Stop now!' Dmitry cries out to the gondolier.

The very moment *their* eyes met he knew without a single doubt that it was *him*. There could only be one man in the whole of the world with such cabalistic blue eyes: the eyes that drew you in with a force of a tornado, put you through swirling hell, and spit you out leaving you marked and bewitched for life. The eyes of Al Moreaux!

Jumping out of the gondola and onto the slimy steps of the embankment, he slips but finds his balance and rushes up the bridge where a minute ago stood Al. Quickly crossing it to the other side, he ends up in a dimly lit arcade. With Al nowhere to be seen, Dmitry stops and listens.

Tuned in to the dark eerie night, he detects a soft echo of his footsteps receding into the depths of a passage. Following the sound, he soon catches up with him. Some distance still between them, Al briskly walks down the narrow street. Keeping to the shadowy patches of the lane, Dmitry comes after him.

Dozens of twists and turns later, Al finally arrives at a quiet angle of a canal where a three-storied, Venetian Gothic style building stands. Approaching the entrance, Al rings the doorbell and waits.

The door opens.

A golden ray of light falls out and accentuates Al's silhouette. His eyes on the entrance, Dmitry moves into the shadows of a house on the opposite corner of the street. As Al steps inside the building, another figure becomes visible in the doorway, the one of a man in a black fitted suit. There is something weird about this figure. Something Dmitry cannot quite grasp until the man turns his face towards the street...

'Joker!'

A rouge grin stuck on his white face, the Joker sticks his head out and throws quick glances up and down the street, then suddenly turns his attention towards the corner. Frozen in his silent awareness, Dmitry cannot get his eyes off the Joker. They stare at each other for a short while. Satisfied, the Joker softly closes the door.

Dmitry waits, then steps out onto the pavement and crosses the street. His heart madly racing, he approaches the very spot where Al stood. Spellbound, he stares at

the door. Lifting his hand, he gently tries the handle. To his utter astonishment, without a single sound, the door opens.

‘Sin’ - Episode 87 (Dmitry Voronov, AI)

‘The Original Sin was never Defiance. The true Original Sin was Ignorance.’ – D.R.

Entering the house, Dmitry ends up in a dimly lit corridor, its walls covered with faded stuccos. On either side of it, asymmetrically placed wrought-iron candelabras mark the way to another room, clearly visible from the door. He proceeds forward. Reaching the end of the narrow passage, Dmitry enters a large hall and bewitched, stops: the path of candles glimmering in the dark continues to a stunning marble staircase, then up to the next floor.

In a Gothic Palazzo, dozens of candles fiercely crackle as a pair of black eyes watches Dmitry Voronov moving along its dimly lit corridor. As soon as Dmitry enters a large hall, the Joker steps out of the shadows and silently but swiftly comes behind him.

Blazing torches in their hands, four Joker-faced men in black fitted suits stand in the corners of a spacious room, bare of any furniture. A magnificent black fox rug, its silky fur glistening, is spread on the stone tiled floor in front of a fireplace. A tall broad-shouldered man in a black silk mask, tinged with red, stands by the fire, watching the flames hungrily licking the crusty logs.

Hearing rhythmical firm footsteps on his marble staircase, the man in the mask turns his head towards the door. His golden eyes feverishly glowing, he watches a man in a long dark coat walk into the room.

His sparkling eyes transfixed on mine, The Mask motions the four Jokers to leave the room. Gleaming torches in their hands, they obediently march out and close the doors behind them.

Alone, we stare into each other eyes. This time, unlike in the Blue Hall, nothing is on the way of ‘unmasking the truth’, not even the loyal Jokers.

My eyes fixed on his I say:

‘Unmask your truth. It’s His desire.’

The Mask grins and lifts his hand, slowly reaching for the mask.

Rider of the Storm - Episode 88 (A1)

'Men were not cheered, for they have returned without victory...' – D.R.

In the ancient city of Venice, the storm is raging. Blasts of piercing wind hit the walls of the Gothic Palazzo, extracting eerie moans and sorrowful creaks out of its aged depths.

The fire roars in the gaping mouth of the marble fireplace. Sucked into the chimney, its soaring golden flames unite with the whirling night.

Surrounded by shimmering candles, a tall broad-shouldered man, a burning red candle in his hand, stands in the middle of the room and recites:

'He of Many Faces...He of Many Eyes... He wants you to shine once more...'

Kneeling down, he draws a scarlet cross on the floor with dripping wax from his candle.

'With the blood of sacrifice, with the smoke of prayer, with the wine of libations...'

The perfect round wax-drops glowing on the marble floor, he puts the candle down and stands up. And as he does a powerful thunder bursts in the night skies of Venice sending lightnings down the city that illuminate its ancient walls.

I suddenly see images of an ancient land, where hundreds of men are kneeling down in front of an imposing altar. Sending their gazes full of hope and fear towards their Goddess, the 'jewels' sparkling in her dazzling monarchic tiara.

Fate - Episode 89 (Dmitry Voronov, Al)

Awake. Shake dreams from your hair, my pretty child, my sweet one. – From ‘Ghost’ by The Doors.

The skies of Venice are bright. Dozens of colourful boats veer off across the azure waters of the *Grand Canal*. Washed by the night rain, the ancient streets of the city brightly glisten in the sun.

Cyclamens in terracotta pots on the stairs of the elegantly refined *Palazzo Paruta Hotel* bathe their delicate scarlet petals in the winter sunshine. The original Venetian marble floors reflect the wall stuccos and tapestries of the seventeenth century noble residence.

In the Royal Suite, tucked between crisp white sheets, a young man lies in bed. His cashmere overcoat is put away in the walnut closet, his clothes, neatly folded, rest on a luxurious velvet sofa.

Next door, on a bed with a gold-leafed headboard, Al, his hair wriggled in a divine mess on the pillow, is fast asleep. His coat is on the floor, his shoes are carelessly thrown onto the plush blue carpet.

Dmitry Voronov shifts his body and opens his eyes. His vision blurred, he looks around: neatly folded clothes on the sofa, a basket of fruits and a silver tea set on a charming little table, blackened logs in the fireplace...

He sits up and moans... The past night's events start coming back to him. *His* eyes, the Joker face, the mysterious Gothic Palazzo, the path of glimmering in the dark candles...

Dmitry's sluggish mind tries to grasp the lost thread, but it slips away. He gives up and flops back onto the bed.

I open my eyes and inhale the captivating scent of red roses. Enjoying the colours of a new day, I lie in bed and indulgently flicker through memories of the past night. The shimmering light of candles, the sweet perfume of hashish, the sumptuous fur of the black rug, The Mask's fingers following a path of red wax drops forming a cross on the marble floor of the Palazzo...

Feeling hungry, I get up, come to an elegantly set table, and grab a perfectly round green apple from the fruit basket. As I plunge my teeth into its sweet flesh, my thoughts turn to Dmitry Voronov...

I take my phone and press on his contact entry.

Dmitry's phone gently vibrates on the walnut bed table. Rolling over, he grabs it. Unknown Italian number... He hesitates for a minute then answers the call and hears an excruciatingly familiar voice.

'*Zdravstvui*, Dmitry!' I say.

'*Zdravstvui*, Al!' He replies his voice slightly hoarse.

'Long time, no see! I hear you are in Venice...' I remark crunching on my green apple. Dmitry falls silent for a short while.

'I hear you are too, Al.' He responds, clearing his voice.

'I guess it's pure luck, isn't it?'

'A generous stroke of fate, I'd say.'

'When fate strikes, it shouldn't be disregarded.' I note, smiling.

'Quite! Especially, when it's applied with such intensity.' He replies.

'The postman always rings twice.'

'Does he?'

'*He* does.'

'When?'

'Tonight, at sunset, *Piazzetta di San Marco*.' I say and disconnect.

San Marco - Episode 90 (Dmitry Voronov)

The sun sets, slowly sinking into the horizon, its fading rays casting golden hues on the Romanesque carvings of *Saint Mark's Basilica*. Clusters of dazed tourists scattered around *San Marco Square*, their cameras and smartphones clicking, take hundreds of snapshots trying to capture the grandeur of Venetian buildings. Smearing in the twilight, streetlights run along the arcaded walls of the *Biblioteca Marciana*, marking the way to the open end of the *Piazzetta di San Marco*.

Throwing a last look into the mirror, a young man exits his Royal Suite and, leaving a trail of chic *eau de cologne* behind him, descends the stairs of the *Palazzo Paruta Hotel*.

The door of the room next to the Royal Suite opens. Al dressed in his long dark coat steps out into the corridor. The footsteps of Dmitry rapidly receding, Al waits then heads to the exit.

Making his way through the crowd of tourist gapers fussing with their phones, Dmitry Voronov walks towards *Piazzetta di San Marco*. Quickly pausing in front of *Saint Marks Basilica*, he stares admiringly at its domed façade, decorated with magnificent arches and delicate embellishments, then turns right and enters the *Piazzetta*.

Past the arcades of *Biblioteca Marciana*, he comes to the open end of the *Piazzetta*, facing the lagoon. Stopping between two large granite columns carrying symbols of the patron saints of Venice, he scans the square searching for the familiar figure of Al in his long dark coat.

An *Aquariva Gucci* motorboat veers out of the *Grand Canal* and enters the waters in front of *San Marco Square*. Cutting through the azure waves, the boat speeds towards the quay.

Having scanned the *Piazzetta* one more time, Dmitry turns his gaze towards the lagoon. In its azure waters, he catches a sight of an elegant white motorboat, quickly approaching the pier. Transfixed, he watches it. Reaching the embankment, the motorboat makes a smooth curve and slows down.

Right before Dmitry, on board the motorboat, silhouetted in the golden rays of the setting sun, stands Al Moreaux, the sides of his long dark coat flapping in the wind. A wide smile on his face, his blue eyes reflecting the water of the lagoon, he stares right at Dmitry. Rooted to the ground, unable to move or take his eyes off Al, Dmitry stares back.

And, as he finally decided to make a move and steps toward the edge of the pier, Al swerves his motorboat, accelerates and zooms away.

THE END