

My Trickster

By Seraphina Michelina Aurelia Bogomolova-Huotelin

Chapter 1: Return

Episode 1 -Return

'It's infectious, Your Voice Your Eyes.' – From *'Infectious'* by Olivier Bassil

"¡Maldita sea! Damn it!"

She calls, emphatically saying I must come. Her voice arriving from the past, jerks me back to a place I thought I'd exorcised from my brain.

Why is her memory still so powerful? No reason, no explanation we just need to meet in Moscow in a week!

She gives me all of a week. Too bad I have my own business, my projects, my life to live. Reluctantly, but sensing a secret burning, an unresolved need, I agree. How will I feel, behave, react to seeing *her* again, and handle that almost palpable sense of powerlessness I always felt when I was with *her*, a powerlessness to resist *her*?

Too late now, the die's been cast.

With my eyes closed, flying silently through the night, I can almost imagine *her*: the power of *her* radiating energy, the golden halo of *her* hair, a whiff of *her* scent, *her* red shoes, glinting and rhythmically clicking as we stroll in the rain... Like memories smeared on shards of shifting glass, *she* cuts back into my mind!

My dear *deer*...

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 *her* that I have always wanted to capture, but, honestly, how can you capture a *deer*?

'¡Maldita sea!'

Episode 2 -Malice

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 dark-haired man, a travel bag on his shoulder, finds a line and edges slowly forward. He moves, patiently waits, moves again... Reaching one of those

typically Russian, yet strangely attractive female customs officers, he smiles and hands his papers over to her. Impassively, wearing a slight scent of malice, 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.

'Mierdra!'

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. A dawning suspicion suddenly creeps over me. Could it be that *she's* somehow caught in the web of one of these capitalistic predators?

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 Ritz-Carlton'*.

Episode 3 - Kiss Her!

'I desire you solely to fulfill all my erotic pleasure. Taboo fantasies with us are our secret treasures'. - From '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 and grabs my hand. The insistent beat of the music's crescendos slam our bodies with feverish vibes. The burning heat of his breath on my skin, he parts his lips and impresses them on my hand.

I pull it away.

"We need to talk." I say.

"*Darling*, 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 her!" He demands.

Episode 4 - Ritz

'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 *Kutuzovskii Prospekt* exit and turn right. Grinding exasperatedly forward, we move in fits and starts, sometimes halted completely.

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

'¡Gracias a dios!' I breathe a sigh of relief and blend into the foot traffic

funneling for the Metro entrance.

Emerging on *Tverskaya Street*, I dodge late-morning traffic heading for the Ritz entrance. My phone buzzes. Another text: '*O2 lounge, faberge chairs, noon*'.
'*Hijo de puta!*' Exhausted I slump into a lobby chair.
'How does *she* 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. My heart crashes.

'*Mierdra!*'

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

"Welcome to Moscow Señor 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 savoring, 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.

"She disrupts my life, summons me here... and...what?! And even doesn't bother to show up! The least she 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.

"She 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*.

'*Que se joda todo el mundo!*'

Episode 5 -Shot

'*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 her!" In the momentary confusion his order creates, I forcefully push the stripper away, and stand up.

"*Svoloch!* Asshole!" I throw at Kazimir and start for the exit.

"Where are you going?! I'm not done yet!" He barks.

I ignore his demand and head for the door through the tables and spellbound strippers. Arriving 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. As it pulls up, I open the door and slide into the back seat. Accelerating, he takes off towards *Zamoskvorechye*.

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 *Pogorel'skiy*, I catch a glimpse of the digital clock: it's 4:35 AM. 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 Neokesariyskii*. 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.

Episode 6 -Dazed

'*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 *her* letter from my pocket. Like an ancient talisman, the secrets of its unknown contents, the lack of any inscription, even the faint hint of *her* scent are at once a powerful incentive to reaching out and connecting to *her* again.

'*¡Coño!*' I stuff the letter back in my pocket.

The bar in the center of '02' has been quickly filling up since my arrival. Ordering several servings of sushi, including my favorite '*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.

Episode 7 - Letter

'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.

'¡Maldita Sea!' 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. Looking at the mess on the living room floor, a white envelope catches my eye...

...Her 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 Pogorel'skiy. Stay there until I can get to you.

La

Episode 8 - Visitor

'You are written in her book. You're number 37, take a look'. - From 'Femme Fatale' by Duran Duran

Light filtering through a slit between the hospital curtains crosses the bed and illuminates a halo of golden locks spread on the pillow. Glancing 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. Suddenly, feeling an urge to see the light outside I lift myself from the bed, and limp toward the window.

Separating the curtains, I look onto the street. 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. Suddenly a loud bang jerks me back to reality. The door slams open. In storms Kazimir and throws a bouquet of red roses onto my bed. Ruptured by the forceful gesture, crimson flowers flood across the white sheet.

"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.

"DO NOT EVEN THINK OF CROSSING ME!" Lowering his face to the level of mine he hisses into my lips.

I stare right back into his raging eyes.

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

With my good hand, I grab some flowers and throw them against the wall. Hitting the blue surface, the roses splatter and fall to the floor in a shower of red.

"Svoloch! Asshole!"

A nurse knocks and comes in, a vase of pink tulips in her hands.
"Your male friend was here this morning and left these for you." She says placing them on the table by the bed.
"My male *friend*?" I echo.

Episode 9 - Pavel

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

The doorbell rings.
'Pavel!'

I kick the door wide open. Wearing a heavy wool coat and a knitted hat, Pavel steps back as it swings by.

"*Cholo!*" 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.

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.

"*She* had this letter delivered to me. Didn't even come in person!" I break the silence. "Here read it" Passing the letter to him, I get up to make some coffee.

"So, *she* wants you to go to *her* flat and wait? Sounds like bullshit to me." Says Pavel, crunching on a cucumber.

'*Mierdra!*'

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

"Let's go. Drive me over to *Pogorel'skiy!*" I say to Pavel, grabbing the bunch of keys she sent me.

Episode 10 - Flat

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

On the way to *Pogorel'skiy*, I cannot get *her* out of my mind. Memories of our being together 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 *her* building. Everything seems strangely familiar.

At *her* door, the big shiny '7B' in brass letters set into smooth wood paneling, I pause, then taking a deep breath, undo the locks.

A beautiful space greets my eyes. *Her* place... Large floor to ceiling windows framed with sumptuous curtains allow even the weak winter light to flood in and illuminate her furnishings. Momentarily at peace, I wander from room to room, feeling her energy, seeing her things, inhaling her lingering scent. It almost feels like I have arrived home.

At the door to her bedroom, I have to lean and support myself with the jamb. My heart feels constricted yet my body tingles all over. An intense, near unbearable desire flows through my whole being. I feel a pressing against the fabric of my trousers.

'Maldite sea!'

A pair of large crows flies by the windows, disrupting the light and the memories of *her*. A new uncomfortable sensation wells up. Detecting one last wisp of *her* presence 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 her building.

'This is the last time I allow my feelings for her to overcome my good sense.' I think, burning her memories from my brain.

Chapter 2: MacBride

Episode 11 - 'Mask'

Pulling the door open, I step inside and walk into my living room. Sergei, carrying some shopping bags, follows me in. Brushing his help off, I get out of my blood-stained 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.

In the kitchen, Sergei unpacks the bags. With the rustling and unpacking done, he comes over carrying the pink tulips in a crystal vase. Placing them on the coffee table, he throws a quick glance at me. I smile at him. He waits.

I wave him good-bye. 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. Suddenly, a whiff of musky scent hits my nostrils.

"Don't do anything stupid." A gloved hand is clasped quickly over my mouth. Steered away from the window, I am pushed onto the sofa. Standing over me is a tall, broad-shouldered man, his face hidden behind a black silk mask, tinged with

red. We study each other a while then, still keeping an eye on me, he steps away from the sofa.

"I don't want a mess, this has to be 'short and sweet.'" He says.

Silent I watch him. He shifts uncomfortably. Suddenly, a burst of laughter erupts from my body, shaking me uncontrollably. He waits then comes over and slaps me across the face.

My head jerks sideways. I lose my balance and topple over. Grabbing my hair he turns my face towards him. Our eyes meet. Bringing his lips to mine he parts them with his tongue.

A man in a black silk mask, tinged with red, stands by the sofa peering down at a woman lying motionless across it. Throwing one last glance at her, he picks up a blood-stained coat from the floor and covers her body with it. Briskly walking out of the flat, he closes the door behind him and using the stairs, exits through the rear door of the building.

Episode 12 – 'Coma'

I'm on the roof of a half-built building across the street, looking into *her* flat. Pavel is in position watching the rear exit. The flat is dark. I glance at my watch: 7:00 PM.

A car pulls up below. Out steps a woman in a white coat. Accompanied by a man, she heads up the stairs. Inside, waiting for the elevator, she turns in a swirl of blond hair towards the street. In the bright light of the lobby I immediately recognize her.

The lights come on in '7B'. Dropping her coat on the floor she sinks down into the sofa. The man places a vase of pink tulips on the table in front of her then leaves. She gets up and comes over to the window. Silhouetted in the bright lights of the flat she looks out. Staring right at *her*, I wonder: '*What on earth has happened to her?*'

Suddenly, a man in a black silk mask, tinged with red, comes swiftly up behind *her*. Reaching out, he grabs *her* from behind and clamps his hand over *her* mouth.

Rushing down to the street, I shout into my mobile at Pavel. Bursting into the flat we see *her* on the sofa, the blood-stained coat over *her* sprawled body. I tear it off and quickly check the pulse in *her* neck. Shaking *her*, I try to wake *her* up. *She* just flops limply in my hands.

"Call for a fucking ambulance!" I scream at Pavel, standing dumb-struck next to me.

Racing to the hospital, the emergency medic gives me a not very convincing reassuring glance.

"Do you have any idea why *she* did this?"

I shake my head. The slow beep of *her* heart beats mechanically out into

space.

Episode 13 -Rendezvous

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 I 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, barely touching me, lies buried in his arms.

Glancing down I see his thick, slightly curly hair, his muscled arms, his toned torso in a white turtleneck sweater...

'MacBride...'

Hearing a soft knock at the door, I pull the oxygen mask back on, and close my eyes. Someone walks in, softly approaches the bed, and stands over me a while, quietly peering down then walks to the door and exits the room. Waiting until the footsteps have receded into the depths of the hospital corridor, I open my eyes again and notice a vase of pink tulips on the table by my bed.

'Damn it!'

Stirring, MacBride shifts his body, and lifts his head to look at me.

I stare back at him. He sits up, moves closer, and embraces me. His arms around me, I feel the warmth of his body, his heart pounding strongly close to mine, his unshaven cheek against my skin. Raising my good hand, I run my fingers through his thick silky hair. Suddenly, his whole body tenses. He pulls back slightly. I slip from his embrace.

"So, MacBride, you've made it to Moscow after all."

Episode 14 - You!

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

With *her* intense blue eyes on me I feel compelled to step back. Looking down at *her* lying there, *her* blond hair framing the pale translucent skin of *her* face, I feel emotionally torn: being jerked around by *her*, possessed by a powerful protective rage, and a fervent desire to know what's going on.

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

"And what do *you* think it is all about, Mac?"

"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. *You...*"

"No, La! *You* haven't changed a bit!"

Avoiding my eyes, *she* looks down. Then, pulling the oxygen mask from *her*

face, *she* drops it on the bed.

"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 did to me? 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 cruelest cuts are the softest." *She* says lifting *her* head and locking *her* piercing eyes on mine.

"I don't believe you, La."

"If you don't believe me, then why are you here?" Tearing the tubes from *her* arm, *she* lifts herself up, and steps onto the floor. In a hospital gown *she* looks almost innocent, vulnerable. Without thinking, I step towards *her* wanting to take *her* in my arms.

"Why are you here, Mac?" *She* repeats, glaring at me with *her* 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, *her* whole body shakes. Turning pale, exhausted, *she* 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 *her* clothes and throw them on the bed next to *her*.

"Here, get dressed."

Episode 15 - Enlighten Me

I take my phone out and call Pavel. Briefly, I give him instructions on meeting us. Hearing *her* struggle into *her* clothes, I offer my help.

"Let me alone, Mac!"

"God, do you always have to be so fucking..."

"'Stubborn' you mean?"

"Fucking right... for no good reason too."

"Turn away, I am not your fucking lover anymore, and I don't need your help!" *She* says, throwing a box of surgical gloves in my face. Twisting away, I easily avoid the box. Finally dressed, I grab *her* coat, and steer *her* towards the door.

Outside Pavel's waiting with the car. Throwing *her* coat into the front seat, I thrust into the back. *She* follows me slamming the car door behind *her*.

"What's wrong with you two?" Pavel asks, surprised.

"And who the fuck are you?" La spits out.

"That's enough, La! Pavel's with us."

"Right! And, where are we going, Mac?"

"My place."
"Your place, what a wonderful news!"
"Pavel! Stop the car! Kick *her* 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 bitch out!" I chock with anger.
"Mac...Take it easy, man." Pavel cuts in.
Suddenly engulfed in silence, we drive on.

Episode 16 - Despair

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.

"La, why don't you take a shower?" Pavel says as he guides me to the bathroom.

"Mac, get her some vodka. I'm going for food."

Mac disappears and returns with a bottle. Taking a huge swig, he hands it to me. Hesitating, I look at Mac, then taking the bottle, walk into the bathroom. Alone, the door closed, I stop in front of a large mirror. Peering at my reflection, I pull my clothes off.

I slide down to the floor propping myself against the bath. Bringing my knees close, I hug them and stare blankly at the wall. Suddenly 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 down my breasts. Feeling of despair gripping me as I slump forward. Feverishly sobbing, I hear a knock on the door.

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

"La..."

Tears still streaming down my face, I wait.

"When you called for me, I suddenly realized how much I've missed you and

how empty my life has been without you. I... I couldn't wait to see you. That is why I came to Moscow."

I sit there, his words slowly sinking in. Wiping tears off my face, I reach for the towel, stand up and undo the lock.

Episode 17 - Rooted

The lock clicks. The door slides open.

Seeing *her* close to me I'm dismayed: *she* stands vulnerable before me like I never saw *her* before. I look into *her* reddened eyes searching for answers, wanting to reach out, take *her* in my arms, comfort *her*... but hesitate.

"Why is she so fucking complicated!?"

Rooted to the floor, unable to move, I just stare at *her*. The moment passes. Walking by me, *she* goes into the room. I follow *her* with my eyes. *She* sits down on the sofa, drawing *her* feet up beneath *her*. I come over and sit down beside *her*. For a moment we both stare out in the room.

"La... Hearing from you was almost like yesterday, like you never left." 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..." She says thoughtfully.

"He said you sent him."

"What was in the note he gave you?"

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

"My keys?"

"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? Right?"

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

La falls silent.

"Someone I know drives an S500. Kazimir. I saw him the night before I was supposed to meet you. We were in a club together." *She* says, looking unblinking in front of her.

"La, 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." *She* says smiling.

Episode 18 - 'Shit'

La still in a towel, I remove my shirt and hand it to *her*.

"See you in the kitchen..." I say 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 she'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 notice the shower being turned on.

"Based on what I know, she 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 her."

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. La mentioned him while you were out."

As Pavel places a nice pile of '*blinis*' on the table, La walks in wearing my shirt.

"La, I hear you are somehow involved with this guy Kazimir. Runs clubs or something?" Pavel smiles at her as she sits down beside me.

"How do you know Kazimir?" She responds, shooting a glance at him.

"I used to be in 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?"

"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 Unit*." She grins.

"La, 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 of what 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 loud, 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 La.

"So... something rings a bell, La!"

"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? He's your lover!" I blurt out.

"I... er... he is..." She trails off, looking down at her plate.

"What, you just happened to bump into him?"

Still looking at her plate, La remains silent.

Episode 19 - Stop!

"Okay, let's go over recent events and see if there's a pattern." I suggest, deliberately ignoring her.

"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. La, you said that you had encountered Kazimir in the club, right?"

"Yes, right." She confirms.

"Okay." I continue, "Then, later, staking out your flat from the building site across the street.... No, wait! La, you were shot! When was that?"

"On that morning we were supposed to meet at about 4:35 AM..."

"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." La replies.

"Anyway, an unknown player. So, I'm staking out your flat and see this man grab you from behind. La, 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. I think he maybe kissed me."

"*Madre a Dio!* What is it with you and all these men?" I burst out.

"Back off Mac!" She throws back at me.

"*Mierdre!* Are you the same woman I fell in love with so many years ago?"

"Maybe I am or maybe I am not, you decide."

"That's enough! We have serious business to deal with. You both need to stop

these lovers' tiffs." Pavel interjects.

"We are not lovers!" La spits out.

"Look La, you're in deep shit. And whether or not you and Mac were, or are lovers, is beside the point." Pavel retorts.

"If you want to help me then help! 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!"

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

"La..." Pavel begins.

"No, Pavel! You're barking up the wrong tree!"

"La, to rule out Kazimir..." Pavel tries again.

"That is enough!" La says and marches out of the room.

"Give me a damn chance will you!" Pavel shouts after her.

"You know Mac, what's with this crazy bitch? What the hell are we doing here tied up in this irrational shit? If she doesn't begin accepting some of what we say there's no way to help her." Grabbing the bottle, he takes a massive gulp. Then slams it back on the table.

Episode 20 - Escape

"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 handbag 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 and toss the mobile on the bed. Taking Mac's shirt off, I 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, and calm myself by repeating, 'It's okay, I always wind up on top in the end, I always do!'

Exhausted, I sit back on the bed taking some time to compose myself. Finally using my good hand, I throw my phone and my other things back into my handbag 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 door, I undo the locks and slip out of the flat.

Chapter 3: Green Dress

Episode 21 - Take Care

Outside, a 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, sweetie?" A middle-aged driver says, smiling at me.

"*Kholodilnui Pereulok!*" I snap, not in the mood for unearned familiarity. Turning away, 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 gray, 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.

Nodding at the concierge, I 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.

"La?"

"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?" Not receiving an answer, he picks up his cigar and, inhaling deeply, blows a cloud of smoke at me.

"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!"

"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!"

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

Approaching the sofa, Kazimir sits down next to me. My head still in my hands, I feel his penetrating stare. Reaching out he puts his arms round me. A scent of expensive perfume wafts my nostrils. Gently stroking my hair, he brings his lips to my neck and kisses me.

"I am going hunting to Finland this weekend. Come with me..." He whispers as his tongue caresses my neck.

"Yes... but first I need to go to St. Petersburg. Sergei's picking me up in 10 minutes." I say quietly, slipping from his embrace. I get up and walk to the door.

"Kazimir... take care." I throw at him without turning.

Episode 22 (Failure)

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

Exchanging with me the look men share having just witnessed one of those un-analyzable female moments, Pavel hands me the bottle.

"When she's had time to take a deep breath or two, she'll realize the shit she's in." I retort. Taking a swig from the bottle, I pass it back to Pavel. We eat in silence mentally digesting the effects of the buffeting we'd just received.

"What the heck's she up to; awfully quiet?" Pavel wonders.

"You're right." I get up and head for the bedroom.

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

'Maldite sea!' I dash for the front door. Racing out into the street I scan it in every direction. The awful truth's now made plain. Utterly dejected, I head back in the building.

"Forget it. She'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.

Episode 23 ('Rocking')

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 St. 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 a 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 boots 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 side table. I pick up a glass in the nickel holder and take a sip. Ever since I was a little girl 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 top off I examine the bandage on my left arm:

'This looks messy...'

Finished grooming, I pull the back of the sofa down transforming it into a large flat bed. My laptop on the side table, I sit down on the bed and draw my feet up beneath me. The computer screen flickers and lights up. For a few seconds I lose myself in the devilish eyes of my 'Envy Rock' friend. Shaking off the spell, I go to my documents and open a folder labeled 'bio-fuel investments-confidential'.

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

Episode 24 (Right Move)

"Tomorrow morning, sharp brief me everything you know, on Kazimir. La 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.

Alone I start pacing the flat thinking about where I went wrong with La. At last I realize two things. It was love and trust that I had, in a state of emotional confusion and jealousy, so conspicuously failed to give her. I will just have to forget about why she left without a word back then, and trust she will give me an answer when she's 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. La had never heard of him, but yet he knew of her, even so far as to have a set of keys to her flat and to know that she'd 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 dial.

"Mr. Moreaux please." I request, and to my utter amazement the switchboard connects me.

"Jacques Moreaux speaking."

Episode 25 (Green Dress)

Getting off the Grand Express I am greeted by a damp, dimly-lit St. Petersburg morning. My high heels rhythmically clicking, I walk along the platform.

"*Moika 22*, please." I say, slipping into one of the many taxis waiting in front of the station. The morning traffic is picking up as we drive along *Nevskii Prospect*. Turning onto *Moika Street*, running along the canal of the same name, we stop in front of a 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 let the porter help me with my small travel bag and escort me to my room. In the room I take my long black 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 several sets of lacy lingerie, my red silk sweater, a couple of white blouses, a pair of navy-blue jeans, and my favorite green open-back evening dress...

I put all the clothes away in the chestnut wardrobe, and lay the green masterpiece of fashion on the bed. Walking into the bathroom I turn the tap, letting water stream into the bathtub, then take my phone out to scroll through contacts. Finding the name, I dial the number.

"Look forward to seeing you tonight." I say as soon as I hear the voice at the other end. "As usual *Beau Rivage*, 7 PM?"

"Yes!" I hear at the other end.

Walking back to the bathroom, I turn the water off and removing my clothes sink into the bath.

Episode 26 (Moreaux)

"Mr. Moreaux, this is MacBride."

"Señor MacBride, I've been expecting your call. How is Miss La?"

"You supposedly gave me a note from her with keys to her flat. The note wasn't hers. She says she's never heard of you."

"Yes, she doesn't know me but she 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?"

"Señor MacBride! I understand you don't trust me! In fact my employer and I both want to protect Miss La. She's in extreme danger, her life is at stake."

"If you and your employer, whoever he is, wanted to help her, then why haven't you done so?" I retort sarcastically.

"We've been trying to get to her but..." he pauses, "as to having her 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. Beside business, Miss La seems to be involved with Kazimir, in other ways too..." He adds suggestively.

"And? What's any of this have to do with you?"

"Señor MacBride, we don't have much time. We know Miss La has gone missing again. You should find her before it's too late. I must emphasize, she's in grave danger."

"If you're so knowledgeable and aware of everybody's movements why don't you find her?" I throw at him.

"Our people are scouring the city... There's no sign of her. We suspect she's left town."

"Mr. Moreaux! I've absolutely no reason to trust you!"

"Well, I have a suggestion for you, Señor 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 hang up.

Episode 27 (No Tricks!)

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

Soaking in the bath, my eyes closed, I savor the moment of peace and weightlessness. Suddenly my mobile rings. I pull myself up and grab the phone from the white tiled floor. Kazimir... I let it ring twice more, then answer his call.

"La... 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 with me." The line crackles as I absorb his words.

"La!" He barks into the phone.

"I will be there, Kazimir, no tricks..." I finally reply.

"Good!" He spits out and hangs up.

Arriving at the downstairs restaurant, I throw a quick glance around candle-lit tables. She's not here yet. I follow an immaculately dressed 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*. Smiling, I turn around to face Bounour. As she walks around the table I admire her long mermaid-like hair streaming over her shoulders and down the back of her off-white dress.

"Hello my sweet." She says, sitting down.

"My dear, 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.

"*Chérie*, are you sure you want to go to that lodge? He has been dreaming about you since you got into that deal with him..."

"I know... I know... This can be lots of fun, don't you think so?" I glance at her. She looks at me with a disapproving air. "Bounour, let's order more champagne, go up to my room, and discuss the details." I say placing my hand over hers.

"You are playing with fire La!"

Episode 28 (On A Hunch)

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 says, wiping butter from his mustache.

"What I 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 most 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 of five people, except during his hunting parties, are there at any one time. His nearest neighbor is over four kilometers 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 any one 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.”

Episode 29 (Hummer)

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 Bounour, who’s 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 Bounour’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 Bounour is right... I am too reckless. Back in the room I throw a glance at Bounour, 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 suddenly 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 color 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 suppose you had great time in St. Petersburg, didn’t you?” He asks, placing his hand on my thigh.

Silent, I stare out the window. Parting my coat he pulls my skirt up and slides his hand between my legs. Feeling the touch of his long fingers, my head starts throbbing. I slowly turn towards him and lean over.

“Get your fucking paws off me, Kazimir!” I hiss, sticking my hand under his balls and twisting them. Stunned by stabbing pain he removes his hand.

Episode 30 (Gone Mad)

Satisfied, I turn away and look out the window. 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 behind him. Andrei drives on toward a guesthouse.

Getting out of the Hummer, I 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, change into a black silk nightdress and go to the living room.

The room is pleasantly warm. I lie down on the huge polar bear rug by the fire and take my laptop out. Listening to the crackling of burning wood I watch the flames lick the bricks of the fireplace, their passionate dance reflecting in my eyes. The feel of Kazimir's fingers between my legs still fresh in my mind, I'm suddenly overtaken by the irresistible desire. Unable to fight any longer, I grab my phone and dial his number. The telephone rings... I wait. Finally he picks up.

"Yes!" He barks into the phone.

"Kazimir... Are you still up?"

"La! What the fuck is it?"

"I... can you come to my lodge to talk about Voronov?"

"Voronov? Have you gone mad, La?! See you at my lodge in the morning!" He hangs up.

Lying face up on the rug, I stare unblinking at the wood logs in the ceiling.

Chapter 4: Hunt

Episode 31 ('Put!')

'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 woman in a black long coat and a grey fur hat steps out. As she walks to the lodge I instantly recognize her.

'It is La!'

'Putal' bursts into my mind as the unexpected sight of her overloads my limbic system.

Episode 32 (Buzz)

Recovering from the initial shock of seeing her 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...' La begins.

'She'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 *'Bitch!'* erupts violently cutting through the general static. Kazimir's phone slams 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 La, Kazimir, the two together...

¡Coño!

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

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

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

Kazimir takes the lodge steps and drives away in the Hummer.

Episode 33 (Stake)

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 hanging up.

'Kozel!' 'Wanker!'

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

Not bothering with a 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.

'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 it, '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 into my cup.

Episode 34 (Winding Path)

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, La? 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 woman 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, grabbing my mobile and fur gloves I 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 and always completely in control of the game yet this morning his reaction caught me off guard. Have I gone too far?

Suddenly I have a burning urge for a cigarette.

Episode 35 (Got'ya!)

La appears and heads down a path into the woods.

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

Rounding a sharp turn that cuts through a thick stand of trees I almost bump right into her as she stands glaring at me from under her grey fur hat.

'Mac! What the fuck!'

'Damn you La! 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, Mac?'

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

'Shut the fuck up, Mac!'

Raising my arm, I take a step forward. She doesn't move, just stares at me daring.

I take a deep breath.

'La... I still love you. I can't help myself. I thought I was over you. You call for me, and the moment I see you it's like yesterday... all over again.'

Episode 36 (Gun)

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

'La, 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.'

'La!!! 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!'

Suddenly Mac quickly moves forward and makes a grab at my throat. I draw away but he pulls me close. With his hand on the back of my neck he brings his head close and forces his lips on mine.

'Get off her!'

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*?' Searching Mac's pockets he removes a gun.

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

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

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

'I've never seen this man before!' I say straightening my fur hat.

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

We remain silent.

A gunshot suddenly shatters our silence. Andrei's face twists with pain. Dropping the gun he falls on his knees and grabs his thigh.

'Fuck!' I cry out.

Episode 37 (Damn it!)

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 at 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 heeled boots sliding in the snow.

Reaching a clearing I spot one of the Kazz's men smoking beside the main building.

'Call an ambulance! Andrei's been shot in the leg!' I cry 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 coat and boots on I sit 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.
Bounour...

'Hey sweetie! How's it going up there?' She intones into the handset.

'*Chérie*, 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 Giorgio, I'll need his help.'

'I'm not sure where he is right now... he could be anywhere, but most likely dropping a quick fortune in Vegas!'

'I wouldn't be surprised!' I reply.

Episode 38 (Honey)

Unzipping my boots I walk to the bathroom, boot-tops flopping on the wood floor, and turn the sauna on.

Back in the living room I finger through the bottles standing on a table by the fireplace and pick out my favourite Bombay Sapphire. Pouring some in a 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. Lying down on a lower bench I spread my body out. The heat quickly warms my skin.

Grabbing honey cream from the bench above I apply it, slowly moving up. The sticky substance melts releasing its sweet scent. A honied sweat slowly drips down, my body glistens in the twilit sauna. I close my eyes and slide my hand down...

Standing in the shower I hear my mobile ringing but I ignore it. Done, a towel wrapped round me, 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. One of Kazz's men walks in.

'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.

Episode 39 (Taste of Wine)

With Kazz nowhere to be seen I plunge into the burgundy sofa and reflect on my situation.

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

I hear footsteps and raise my eyes. Kazimir enters the room throwing a quick glance at me.

Opening the humidor he selects a cigar then goes to the sofa opposite mine and sits down.

'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. Leaning over he starts caressing my left breast.

'You have a beautiful dress on... I am sure you will look even more beautiful without it...'

'I do not think it's a good idea, Kazz...' I whisper blowing a thick cloud of smoke into his face.

One of his attendants interrupts us announcing that dinner is served.

I hand the cigar back to Kazimir and go to the dining room.

At the table an awkward silence one more time spreads over us.

Having no intention of breaking it I keep on thoughtfully chewing 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 from his crystal wine glass Kazz finally utters.

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

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

He slowly puts his glass down and locking his eyes on mine watches me approach him.

Pulling my dress up I sit down on his laps, my legs wide spread. His eyes grow

wider. I twist my hand into his hair. Brining my head close I lick his lips tasting the wine he's just drunk.

Episode 40 ('Short Squeeze')

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 a last look at La 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.

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

'Pavel! I could do with a really good hamburger!'

'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% Kazz wants.' I break the silence.

'Go on!' Pavel responds.

'Stock manipulation.'

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

'But how will you stop her?' 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!'

'She'll recognize soon that her original plan won't work.' I go on.

'Then she'll need a plan B.' Pavel notes.

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

'She'll tell Kazz she 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 she'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

Episode 41 (Bitch)

Moving my head slightly away from Kazz's face I stare into his black eyes then brush his lips with my fingers... Impatiently he draws me close, fixes his lips on mine and fills my mouth with his tongue.

I push him away and get up.

"La!" He shouts, grabbing my arm and twisting it. Jumping to his feet he pulls me forcefully back to him.

"You... Bitch!" He hisses, hot breath on my face.

"The game's 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 my dear, 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 to the table 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. Abruptly he stops and moves behind me. Pressing hard against me he places his hands on my

thighs.

"By the way, you are expected at the Ball at *Konstantinovsky Palace* in two days."

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

"Voronov misses none of The Mask's Balls." He says running his hands down my thighs.

"No...he doesn't." I mutter, sipping more wine. Hands crossed in front, he quickly twists me and pulls me close.

"Tell me what you want!" He breathes into my ear.

Episode 42 (Bite)

A black Benz pulls into a diagonal parking space, facing the Starlite Diner in Pushkin Square. The driver cuts the lights, pulls out a cell phone 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 '02' 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 leaving 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.

"¡*Maldita sea!*" 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 right 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.

"¡*Coño!*" The musky scent of *Voyage d'Hermes*... a 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.

Episode 43 (Faberge Suite)

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 St. Petersburg. Finished I go to the window and peer outside. It's snowing... I stand there for a while watching big fluffy snowflakes fall 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 restlessness grows as memories of *him* slash into my mind.

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. *His* fiery eyes are all I can see... burning me with an eternal fire, screwing into my soul... sucking my entire being into a bottomless black hole of dark joy... A kiss of darkness... a caress of cold fingers... a tease of enigma... *My* dark joy...

I land at Pulkovo airport in St 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. Only "112" is written on it.

As the car zooms through the foggy grey St. Petersburg morning, I can't stop thinking about *him*... *One ought not play with shadows, lest they swallow one whole...*

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 when he's alone...

Swiping the card I enter the Suite. Shadows of my 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 coloured shades, touching the

light, almost-white furniture encrusted with precious stones.

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's always gone before dawn.

Getting up I 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.'*

Episode 44 (Kiss)

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."*

Deep within me, a familiar, dark sensation rises. The drapes sway gently. A figure in a silver mirror-mask steps out of their shadows. 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 pressing intensity of the husky voice emanating from behind the mask. Though the figure moves closer as he speaks his eyes are still concealed by the dim light of the room.

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

"La...La..." a husky voice penetrates into my subconscious. I feel a brush of cold fingers on my face, an insistent tongue on my lips... a kiss of darkness...

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." He whispers.

"Did I?" I mutter.

"Yes, you did, and 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, he covers my eyes with his hand and licks my lips then moves his mouth down my chin, reaching my neck. Brushing his lips against my skin he caresses me with his tongue.

"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..."

Opening my eyes, I see the curtains 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.

Episode 45 (Invitation)

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

"Señor 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.

"Señor MacBride, may I offer you a drink?"

"A poisonous one?"

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

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

"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.

"Señor MacBride, please have a seat." Moreaux orders firmly. Reluctantly but sensing the urgency of the situation I obey.

"Now, Señor MacBride, it might come as a surprise to you but we share a common interest. It's Miss La...my employer is as keen as you in finding out what's going on. Have you ever wondered why she summoned you to Moscow?"

"Not the slightest idea!" I reply.

"As far as we gathered, you are one of the people she has had a very strong affiliation with in the past. We believe you can cast some light on her past that can help us to deal with her 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, Moreaux inhales on his cigar and blows a thick cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

"For a very good reason, Señor MacBride: your own life is at stake." I stare at Moreaux, his words sinking in.

"My life's at stake?"

"We believe Miss La will attempt to assassinate you and quite soon."

"*Mierda!* But why would she do that!?"

"That is what we are asking you to find out." He concludes. Walking to the desk, he picks up a crisp white envelope and hands it to me.

"Here, take this. It's my invitation to the Ball in *Konstantinovsky Palace*. I know she'll be there. You'll have to act before she strikes."

Episode 46 (Bonjour)

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 Bounour strides in.

"*Bonjour chérie!*" 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." I laugh.

"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 Bounour 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 *St Peterburgskoe Shosse*, our taxi speeds North towards *Strelna*.

"Did you get hold of Giorgio?" I ask Bounour as I run my fingers through the grey fur of my hat, resting on my laps.

"Yes. He arrived last night. He'll be waiting at the location." Bounour replies.

"He's a good kiddo, isn't he?" I throw a quick glance at her.

"Yes, a very talented bastard." She replies, a sparkle in her eyes.

"And damn gorgeous too." I add laughing.

"*Cherie*, how's MacBride?" Bounour inserts.

"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."

Episode 47 (Giorgio)

Our taxi pulls in front of a beige coloured 'château'. 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 Center, where Giorgio was instructed to wait for us. Blue eyed, the golden locks flowing down his forehead, he shoots a dazzling smile at us.

"Buongiorno, girls!"

We greet him 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 Bounour and Giorgio. 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'm trying to discretely instruct Giorgio on his job. Focused, he 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 Nikolayevich, 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 hand somewhere towards the centre of it and proclaims:

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

Episode 48 (Madre a Dio!)

I stuff the envelope with an invitation into my pocket, stand up and head for the door. Signaling the girls to follow me, Mr. Moreaux waves me good-bye.

"Good luck, Señor 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 La kaleidoskop in my head: “*Her radiating energy, the blond halo of her hair, a whiff of her scent, her intense, raging blue eyes...*”

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

“*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.

Episode 49 (What’s Up?)

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 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 Bounour and Giorgio to continue I step aside and answer the call.

“La?” 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 hangs up.

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 silk green dress and stilettos on, I get into the ruby black hotel limousine. Softly taking off, the BMW 7 glides along *Nevsky 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.

Episode 50 (Impromptu)

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, playing with the white triangle of his napkin.

"*Zdravstvui*, La." 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 with a slight husky note in his voice.

"The pleasure's all mine..."

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, La?" 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, La. You tell me." He replies, watching the dancing flames of three candles in the gilded candelabra.

"All-right...I met him ten years ago in Hamburg. I used to work with him in his hedge fund. At a time our relationship was purely professional 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.

“You know I always do, Dmitry.”

“In this case our plan stays unchanged.” He grins pushing a black shiny box laced with red ribbon towards me.

Chapter 6: Ball

Episode 51 (Interlude)

‘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 dark-haired 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 Giorgio and Bounour 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 Giorgio stretched out on my bed, his golden locks glowing on the pillow. I scrutinize his beautifully composed body for a few seconds then bending over, I grab his hair and turn his face toward me.

“Off my bed, now!”

Opening his blue eyes, he stares at me smiling, then pulls me close.

“Stop it! We need to talk.” I laugh, twisting away.

He unwillingly drags himself off the bed and throws a bathrobe on. Moving to the living room we settle into the purple armchairs.

Pouring the remains of the champagne into our glasses, I pick up the velvet

box given to me by Dmitry earlier in the evening. The red ribbon untied, I lift the lid and inside find a carefully folded, black silk mask, tinged with red.

I throw a quick glance at Giorgio lounging in the armchair, a glass of champagne in his 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 Giorgio.

"Here you are. Your mask for tomorrow's event."

Episode 52 (Reflection)

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

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

A stark naked brunette is viewing me from behind my bathroom mirror. Her dark hair contrasting with the porcelain colour of her 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 the 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 give it a kiss. Back in my bedroom, unlocking the safe I get the handgun out. Suddenly I'm hit by a fervent craving. Rapidly growing, it rushes to the surface, bursts out and sweeps me into a black hole. Dropping the gun I sink to the floor.

'He knows. He's been following you.' His words start pulsating in my head. Clenching my teeth, I slump forward.

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 *Strelina*.

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.

Episode 53 (Blue Hall)

Suddenly the spell is shaken off. I feel the cold and turn to Bounour signaling it's time to go. She nods in agreement, her golden brown eyes radiating from beneath 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. Our high heels rhythmically clicking, 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 Bounour, 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.

"La, 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.

Episode 54 (Canapé)

'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 Bounour in her tailed open back dress, engaged in an animated conversation with two men: a Skull and a Lord of Shadows.

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

“Cherie!” cries out Bounour, seeing me approach them.

Giving her a kiss, I quickly acknowledge the Lord 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, signaling 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 La! *Putta!*” He blurts out.

Grabbing his bottle from the table, he stalks off towards Bounour and the Lord of Shadows who’ve been eyeing us from their *canapé*. Mac out of sight, I pick up his mask from the sofa and stare into the Skull’s glaring sockets.

Episode 55 (*Shisha*)

Sipping my 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 'Faberger' crystal-embroidered dress instantly 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.

Episode 56 (Hall of Truth)

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 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 obscure 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 and am met by the eyes of the Lord of Shadows. I take his hand and pulling him close, invite the Lord into my dance. Entwined, melting into the music, we rock, bathing in the warmth of each other's bodies: *'Talented bastard indeed...'*

"Where is Mac?" I ask.

"Still in the VIP, doesn't suspect a thing." He 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..."

He grabs me by the waist and lifts me up. Throwing my head back, I look at the glass ceiling catching dozens of inverted reflections of Gods, Wolves, Phantoms, Demonesses, Vampires, Ghosts and Satyrs. Head spinning, I catch a glimpse of Bounour's intricately laced face and Griffin's black eyes transfixed by her crimson lips.

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

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

Episode 57 (Mine)

'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 Hall are now closed. The Jokers, Black Assassins of The Mask, are blocking all exits.

"HE of Many Faces...HE of Many Eyes..." His husky 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. Clenching my teeth, I try to control the familiar, dark sensation rising within me. Growing stronger it fights to burst to the surface.

"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.

Suddenly a single beam of bright light is shone upon me. My crystal dress 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.

Approaching me, *he* reaches out, lightly touching my mouth with *his* cold fingers.

"Glad you could make it tonight." *He* says as *he* caresses my lips.

"My pleasure." I whisper.

"No... the pleasure is all but *mine*." *His* husky voice becomes deeper. Bringing *his* head to mine he brushes *his* lips against my cheek. Reaching my earlobe he embraces it with *his* mouth and breathes into my ear:

"HE wants you to know... HE wants you to feel..."

Episode 58 (Sacrifice)

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

Stepping slightly away from me, *he* signals with his eyes to follow him and starts making his way to the stage in the middle of the room. Ascending the stage, *he* moves to the centre and motions four veiled strippers in stiletto thigh boots to form a circle around us.

Standing motionless in a single beam of light, encircled by the strippers, surrounded by the oblivious crowd we stare into each other's eyes, my icy blue irises reflected in his golden fiery gaze.

Slowly, he lifts his hand and places it at the back of my neck. A single crystal button of my backless dress unfastened, he unhurriedly pulls its sleeves down exposing my shoulders and my breasts.

"Unmask your truth. It's HIS desire..." He whispers, his eyes still fixed on mine.

Suddenly, a powerful burst of thunder fills the room. Dozens of lightning flashes play amidst the crowd. Instantly reanimated, the revelers start rocking to the psychedelic tunes streaming from the speakers.

"Remember... there is no play... there is no game... no game at all." I say my eyes glaring at him. He groans and pulls me close. His mouth on mine, he burns my lips with black fire, sucking my tongue with a fierce passion.

In the deserted VIP room, 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 dimly lit Hall, the man in the black silk mask, tinged with red, passionately kisses a stark naked brunette in the sinuous Swarovski mask. With her back to him, their bodies closely fitting in, she arches as he caresses her.

Episode 59 (Awakening)

'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 6 am. I stand in the Blue Hall, now clear of all guests. Its floor is littered with feathery, silky, lacy, and leathery masks lying amidst golden confetti. I look at the stage where some hours ago I entwined with The Mask in a ravishing dance of dark pleasure. A kiss of darkness... a caress of cold fingers... a tease of enigma...*My dark joy...*

Coming to one of the mirrors, I untie my mask and take it off. Shaking my hair, I catch a familiar reflection of the brunette in the 'Faberge' crystal-embroidered dress.

In the vivid light of the sapphire chandeliers, I gaze at my pale face with blue eyes embraced by dark circles. Suddenly, I notice another presence reflecting in the mirror. Turning around I meet Bounour's stare beaming with agitation.

"What is it?" Unnerved I blurt out.

"Cherie, have you... have you..."

"What?"

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

"What are you exactly getting at?"

"Well... there is something there... you should see..." 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. Bending over, I take his mask off.

"It's MacBride!!" I exclaim.

"I know!" She replies glaring at me.

"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 Giorgio!"

"No, Giorgio was with *me*! He told me he'd left him with some girls!"

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

"Get Giorgio NOW!"

My mind starts racing. Searching for an answer, I look into Mac's wide-open eyes. The words of The Mask creep into my mind: '*He knows. He's been following you.*' A shiver runs through my body, unable to bare Mac's dead stare anymore I reach out and close his eyes.

Episode 60 (Pilot)

Unmasked, we stand over the dead body of MacBride.

"La, *this* doesn't look good." Giorgio breaks the 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 a back door of the VIP room.

In a dimly lit corridor of the Palace, a blonde man and two dark haired women in evening dresses drag a stiffening corpse in the tuxedo. 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 corpse propped up against the wall, they start a discussion in low voices.

Their muffled conversation soon finished, the brunette in the crystal-embroidered dress 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.

Suddenly, he hears the greenish metal door leading to the roof creak behind him. Relieved, he turns around and is greeted by a gun directed at his head.

Straining, we push Mac's dead body inside the helicopter. With Bounour

taking place of the pilot, I slide next to Mac and fasten our belts. Doors closed, Bounour places her hand on the sidestick and starts the engine.

Our shiny black MD 500E propels into the sky. As we hover over the awakening city, I lean my head against the cold glass of the helicopter's door and peer into the horizon brushed with the pink-rose light of the breaking dawn.

"What a waste!" I say to myself thinking of MacBride.

Chapter 7: Voronov

Episode 61 (Walled Off)

Exhausted, I stagger into the Suite, a call to Dmitry seems to be the next wise thing to do. Discharging this notion for the time being I walk into my bedroom and flop onto the bed. Blurred images of the past day's events begin swimming in front of me. Closing my eyes, I drift away.

I lie in the dark awake, gazing at the chandelier suspended from the Suite's ceiling and think of MacBride. Resting in his tomb, walled off, exorcised from my world 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 corpse cemented into a wall of one of the 'under construction' villas on *Chernaja Rechka*...

'Motherfucker!'

I dial Voronov's number.

In a spacious modern apartment, spreading over the two floors of an old palace, 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. Suddenly his mobile rings, breaking his uneasy solitude.

Hearing long rings at the other end, I think on whether this is the right move to make.

"Dmitry?"

"La?"

"Dmitry... I need to talk to you in private."

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

"I'll tell you when we meet."

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

I hang up and toss my phone on the bed.

Episode 62 ('Millionnaya')

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 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 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 woman in a long black coat, unhurriedly moving towards his house.

Seeing her approach the gate, he moves away from the window and comes to the entrance door. He stands there patiently waiting, almost seeing her ascending the stairs, her long coat sweeping the ancient dust of the house. Sensing her radiating, powerful presence behind the door, he closes his eyes and holds his breath. Suddenly, the doorbell 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 meet the gold brown eyes of Dmitry.

'Zdravstvui, La!' He breathes out.

Episode 63 (Did You?)

"Zdravstvui, Dmitry!"

Deaf to my greeting he stands there bewitched, 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 my coat.

"May I?" says Dmitry, coming forward, reaching out.

I let him help me.

"Can I offer you a drink?"

"Yes, please."

Fetching me Bombay Sapphire, he pours himself some too and sits down next to me on the white leather sofa. Studying his 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 purely professional relationship..." He says, sounding the least surprised.

"Dmitry... back in *Palkin* restaurant I did not tell you the whole truth about MacBride... about our relationship... I know him a lot better than I wanted you to believe. We were more than business partners. We were lovers. Even more than that actually... 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.

"La... 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 *Chernaja Rechka*..."

"Well... in this case there is nothing to worry about." He says thoughtfully looking into my eyes. "Or is there?" He adds after a short pause.

"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..."

Episode 64 (The Others)

"You are a hell of a jewel, aren't you?" He says, lighting up a Davidoff cigarette.

"Likewise, Dmitry! 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."

"Dmitry! I don't need any more corpses in this story. One is quite enough!"

Throwing his head back, he rocks with laughter.

"La, darling, 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, *darling!*"

"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, "Maybe... I just felt like gently 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..."

"La, he can't be a challenge for an infectious seductress like yourself; he is nothing but a slightly annoying obstacle."

Episode 65 (Will you stay?)

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, La." He says, pouring champagne into our glasses.

"Thank you... I was not aware of your poetic skills, Dmitry." I say, picking up my glass.

"I haven't been either... So, to you darling and the success of our enterprise!"

As we each take a sip from our glasses, I lock my eyes on Dmitry, taking in his inviting posture, his clean-shaven face with a touch of a light tan, his glowing eyes curiously studying me. A sudden thought crosses my mind.

"Dmitry, there is something I meant to ask you. 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, it's late."

"Please stay... My chauffeur will bring you back to your hotel tomorrow morning."

"Is this an attempt to chivalrously seduce me, Dmitry?"

"I'd say it's just a humble attempt to make your life seductively indulgent."

"Thank you, Dmitry, for your concern, but I really have to go." I say smiling 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 she descends the stairs, La pushes the metal gate open, and slips out onto the street. Her fur hat and gloves on, she 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 La that quickly moves away towards the *Palace Square*. Standing there, he follows her with his eyes until she disappears out of his somewhat blurred sight.

Episode 66 (Knaus)

The true man wants two things: danger and play. For that reason he wants woman, as the most dangerous plaything. - 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 woman who delivered this sad news, jerked Dr. Peter Knaus ten years back to the time of his first encounter with La...

There was something disturbingly magnetic about her, something he couldn't quite put his finger on: extremely feminine, yet ruthless, sensual yet tough, seeming available yet completely unobtainable. To the orderly brains of Dr. Knaus, La presented a riddle he could never solve no matter how hard he tried.

Every meeting, every encounter with her was filled with a deep sense of dread and a complex amalgam of emotions: he hated and desired her at the same time, he struggled against her charms yet felt powerless to resist her, tricked, bewitched, stripped of all his will, all at once.

Ever since her 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, La was a hazardous woman who threatened his otherwise calm, orderly and comfortable existence. He had a gut feeling that she was the one responsible for Mac's disappearance, yet couldn't resist the masochistic desire of seeing her again and experiencing ecstatic sensation of her powerful and radiating energy.

Angela Moreaux... the most dangerous, seductive, and powerful woman he has ever known.

As he stands by the window, still thinking of La, a sudden wave of tiredness overcomes Dmitry Voronov. 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.

"La?!" is the last thought that crosses his mind before he swiftly drifts into unconsciousness.

Episode 67 (Carnal Desire)

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. Opening his eyes, Dmitry 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. La... his fascination and obsession of the past six months. He first encountered her at an event in *Palkin* restaurant, organized by *Cigar Clan Magazine* and sponsored by *Davidoff* brand. She was there in a company of an elderly Swiss gentleman, whose extensive knowledge of cigars caught Dmitry's attention. Elegant, confident, excruciatingly feminine, she emanated the sort of charisma that was so rare among the women he was usually acquainted with. For him, she was a highly challenging prey, a promise of exhilarating hunt and a fascinating subject of his most carnal longing.

Yet very soon, he came to realize that he was in for a long and exhausting chase, as La 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 and bring her closer to him. Knowing about her skills in stock manipulation, he offered La a lucrative deal and employed her services in destroying his old enemy and rival, Kazimir Stankevich. Now, six months later, to his own surprise, he found himself still nowhere near to satisfying his burning desire. And not just that, he also found himself slowly falling under the spell of her feminine magnetism.

Glancing at his stainless steel *Cartier* watch, he finally stands up and drags himself upstairs to take a shower.

Episode 68 (Hamburg)

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 feminine power.

Hamburg... the city where ten years ago I came across the two aspiring testosterone fueled 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, one of my first lovers and the 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... to be precise, 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 things and left.

Episode 69 (Deal)

In a small cozy 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, Angela!"

"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, Angela! What's the deal?" He finally utters.

Episode 70 ('My Joy')

It's infectious, Your Voice Your Eyes. It's promiscuous, My Joy My High.

– From *'Infectious'* by Olivier Bassil

In a glass-walled shower enclosure of his modern, minimalist bathroom decorated with chrome fixtures and fittings, Dmitry Voronov stands, his tanned, toned 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 La...

Not resisting, happily surrendering, he admits to his most cherished and relishing fantasies about her. 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.

The jets of warm water gently caressing his bodily parts, he closes his eyes, letting his imagination untie the dream one ribbon at a time... Her intense blue eyes slowly pull him in, capturing his whole being in their radiating embrace. In his arms, her warm body entwined with his, she surrenders under his firm but gentle caress. Her porcelain skin glistens with sweat as their bodies move in a sultry dance...

His hand twisted in her golden hair, spread in a divine mess on his pillow, her smell all over him he passionately thrusts inside of her.

Rocking her into coming he stares into her wide-open, ecstasy filled eyes and feels her taut body arching underneath him. And finally when her breath becomes deep and frequent and she reaches the peak of her orgasm, he covers her mouth with his and captures her cry.

Overcome by an overwhelming desire, he feels his hardness, 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 close 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 La's number and is immediately greeted by the automated message announcing that she 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, Angela Moreaux, has already checked out.

Chapter 8: Moreaux

Episode 71 (What the Fuck?)

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 skillful, 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 bitch La. His 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 her.

In the attempt to find La, he sent his people to Pogorelsky to monitor her flat. But since her disappearance there has not been any activity of interest there. He remembers quite clearly her saying that their deal is sealed and delivered... Where the fuck has she gone?

Despite their hate-love business dealings he had to admit that she was a hell of a smart and attractive woman, whom he badly wanted to lay his hands on. 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 her. With any other woman in the whole of Moscow it would be a matter of days, if not hours, before she would end up in his bed... but La... La was as inaccessible as a walled castle.

What is it that she really wants? He often found himself thinking. However, the question still remained unanswered in his head. Sighing, he moves for the phone and dials La's number. The automated message yet one more time informs him that she is temporarily out of reach. He dials another number connecting to his people on Pogorel'skiy. No news.

"What the fuck?!!!" He swears slamming the phone down.

Episode 72 (Monte Rosa)

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 Porshe 911 with a brunette 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 her remote control, the brunette opens the garage door and drives in.

A travel bag on her shoulder, she walks into the pitch-dark hall of the house and disables the security system. Proceeding to the living room, she lifts the metal shutter off a large glass wall and takes in a view of the dazzling mountains stretching in front of her.

Sliding the glass door open, she steps out onto the roofed terrace, its floor laid with solid mahogany. Motionless, she 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.

His walk was unsteady. I came. I pushed gently. That was enough. He stumbled and started his glorious fall. Happy falling, Dr. Peter Knaus!

My breakfast ready, I sit down on a black Perspex stool at the granite bar and switch on a glossy Plasma screwed to the kitchen wall. 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.

Episode 73 (Determined)

Though Angela's sudden and somewhat surprising disappearance has left throbbing wounds on his male ego, it also fueled 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 her, 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.

Angela Moreaux... her name sounded strangely familiar to his ear yet he was absolutely certain that she never used it once, at least with him. Up until now, it never occurred to Dmitry to even look into what her real name actually was. In fact, he just realized how, enthralled as he was with the development of his seductive ploys and preoccupied with his carnal desires, 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 she mentioned in their last conversation. His gut feeling indicated that if properly handled, Pavel Nekrassov could be of great help in locating Angela'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 kilometers away from the craze of Moscow's rat race, Pavel Nekrassov lounges on his 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 them while studying the bare cement walls of his living room.

Occasionally, between his crunches and his Ikea inspired interior design mullings, 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 Dmytry Voronov, which according to Mac went fabulously well.

Suddenly his phone rings. A glance at its screen tells him that, fucked if he knows who it is calling, years working in OMSON taught him not to disregard or ignore any signs, even if completely perplexing ones.

He answers the phone. To his muffled "Hello" a firm and somewhat arrogant voice at the other end introduces himself as Dmitry Voronov. Caught unawares by such generous stroke of fate, Pavel chokes on his cucumber.

Episode 74 (Photograph)

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 honored 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 make a raid on La's residence on *Pogorel'skiy*.

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 her door, Pavel behind him keeping polite distance, Dmitry pauses, gazing at the big shiny '7B' set into smooth wood paneling. 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 her 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 woman Angela 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 his heart.

In the apartment '7B' on *Pogorel'skiy*, 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 gently open, he walks in.

The shadow of a wind, lightly touching his face, evokes sensual whispers. Traveling across the room, it 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 blond woman 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. He turns it over and sees a short note written in a neat round handwriting: '*To my dearest granddaughter.*'

He pockets the photograph and, throwing a last look around, leaves the bedroom.

Episode 75 (Smoke)

*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. Soaking up the features of the woman he knows only so well, he contemplates the note at the back of the photograph.

'To my dearest grand daughter...'

The elderly man sitting next to Angela 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 St. 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 brunette in a white turtleneck sweater and a pair of black jeans, her feet drawn up beneath her, sits in an armchair on the terrace of the modern glass house positioned on one of the plateaus of *Monte Rosa*.

Beside her, on the polished wood mahogany table, steam billows from hot chocolate in the big red cup decorated with white polka dots.

A sweet vanilla scent in the air, Davidoff cigarillo between her fingers, she 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. Overcoat 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.

Episode 76 (Library)

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 with 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. Unobstructed moonlight floods through the glass wall into the room casting a silver beam on a huge coyote fur rug, voluptuously 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 hands, slightly surprised by the darkness he switches the lights on, then methodically going from room to room illuminates the house.

Reaching the library he pauses in the doorframe and peers inside.

"Angela?" He calls into the darkness of the library.

Hearing a familiar soft voice, I open my eyes. Silhouetted in the doorframe is the lean figure of Jacques Moreaux.

"Grandpa!" I scream out. Jumping on my feet, I rush towards him. Laughing with delight as I hug him, he shelters the pink tulips from being squashed in my tight embrace.

"Have you been indulging into your 'dreamland', my angel?" He asks.

"How do you know?" I say smiling.

"Angela, I am the one who had the pleasure to observe you since you were a kid. Don't you think I would learn by now what you are up to, when you leave the whole house in the dark?" He replies passing the pink tulips to me.

"Thank you... I love darkness..." I trail off taking the flowers.

Episode 77 (In the 'Kitchen')

“Good cigar, a bit of whisky and a long awaited catch up, my angel?” He 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 bar, 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 doing.

“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?”

Suddenly I feel like a school-girl caught lying to the head master.

“Erm... you know, perhaps calling them ‘minor’ would be an underestimation.”

“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 you and Bounour are the most precious people in my life and I feel it is my duty to protect you both.”

Trying to come to terms with such revelation I keep silent.

Episode 78 (Back Up)

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. - Bernard of Clairvaux

My grandfather, his eyes on me full of affection, patiently waits. I don’t utter a word.

“Angela, 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...”

"Grandpa... 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."

"Grandpa! 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 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 'savior' 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, Angela!" He throws at my back, guilty notes in his voice.

Episode 79 (The Morning After)

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 over protectiveness 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 white silk 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 scarlet pullover over his white shirt and a pair of black velvet

trousers, he throws a wide smile at me.

"Grandpa! Are you up already!?"

"Yes, my sweetheart. 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, my angel, 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."

"Hmm, 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, sarcasm in my voice.

"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..."

Episode 80 (Number 13)

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 St. Petersburg confirmed his theory on the identity of Angela's grandfather. The very proper Swiss gentleman in a company of whom he once met Angela and an elderly man from the photograph he found in Angela's flat were one and the same person: Jacques Moreaux.

Being an honorable 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 a restaurant of *Beau Rivage Hotel* and anxiously awaiting the meeting with Angela'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

Episode 81 (Privacy)

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 craved-for hot chocolate.

Pouring it into my favorite 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. No... 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, Angela, 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 breathtaking view of a mountain range visible through a ceiling-to-floor window.

In the tub, the body of a brunette floats, her dark hair streaming in the azure water. Staring up at the crystal chandelier illuminated by the winter sun, her wide-open eyes reflect a mirage of vivid sparks.

Cocooned by the warm water, I lie in my favorite 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 husky 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...*

A kiss of darkness...

All of a sudden, 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.

Episode 82 (Twice the Smoke)

Cunning is the art of concealing our own defects, and discovering other people's weaknesses. - William Hazlitt

"Mr. Voronov?" Says Jacques, curiously studying the features of a well-groomed young man, whose elegant hands are clinging to a creased napkin.

"Mr. Moreaux?" Echoes Dmitry, getting up and reaching out for a handshake. Taking Dmitry's hand, Jacques gives it a dry but polite squeeze and sits down.

Suddenly finding himself in front of this grey-haired 'fox', Dmitry 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. Jacques seemed to possess that same irresistible magnetism, which Dmitry so loved and admired in Angela; the very charisma that made Dmitry so powerlessly weak every time he tried to confront her.

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, thank you." Jacques 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 Jacques, offering Dmitry a cigar from his case.

"Certainly!" Dmitry responds, taking one of the chocolaty, elongated tobacco bundles. Lighting his cigar, Jacques inhales on it and blows out two thick clouds of smoke through his nostrils.

"Well, Mr. 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 Angela.

"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, Jacques nods in agreement.

"I've been an avid smoker for years, but only just recently I've discovered the pleasure of savoring a good cigar. To me it still remains a rather vast and unexplored field, which I'm very keen in learning more about."

"I am quite enthralled by your capturing introduction, Mr. 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." Jacques grins, 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."

"Right, that is pretty much what I have suspected, Mr. 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 much more subtle in flavor 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.

Episode 83 (Down to Business)

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 flavor. 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. Jacques 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.

"Angela?" He calls softly. No response.

"Angela?!" 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. Angela.*'

His head throbbing, Jacques sinks into the armchair then takes his mobile out

and dials Dmitry's number.

Episode 84 (Howl)

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 stunning brunette with the pair of luminous blue eyes walks up the stairs of the house, her shiny high-heeled boots beating a sensuous rhythm on its ancient limestone steps.

Past the caged candles and potted blood-red cyclamens, a well-groomed young man 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 flesh inspired quest for Angela Moreaux has been painfully slow. To be exact, it has not moved an inch since Jaques's call informing him about her likely whereabouts. To the utter disappointment of them both, none of the hospitality residences given by Mr. Moreaux had her name on their guest lists.

Despite this obvious fact, something told Dmitry that she *was* here, within his reach, just a grasp away. Absent yet strangely present... As predators sense their prey, so he could feel her radiating 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 the curvy lines of Angela's voluptuously seductive body lingering to him, her hand running through his hair... He sees her bright crimson lips dangerously close, barely touching his mouth... Suddenly fueled by the vivid imagery of his imagination, a dark longing stirs deep within him. He feels the burning heat of her breath. Inhaling her diabolically alluring scent, he stares into her cabalistic eyes as her hand slowly slides down between his legs.

Opening his mouth he utters a lingering howl and wakes up. Sweat on his forehead, breathing heavily, he 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.

Episode 85 (Bridge)

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 lustful intentions sealed within its depth. A kiss of darkness...

Back in my room, I walk to the window and parting the veils, look outside. The envelope in my hand bewitched, I stand there 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 fantasy, 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 Venetian 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, a young man lounges on its cushioned seat in an alluring pose.

"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 the young man, as their gondola passes under the bridge.

Pondering these words, the young man stares upwards at the sinuous arch of the bridge. Crossing an invisible border, the gondola enters the Venetian district of *Castello*.

A brunette in a long dark coat hurriedly walks through the city's blind passageway. The heels of her red shoes hitting the ancient limestone send

reverberating echoes down the twisting streets of Venice. As she approaches a narrow bridge hanging over one of the *Castello* district canals, she slows down. Coming to the middle of it, she briefly pauses and throws a look downwards, meeting the eyes of a young man in a passing gondola.

For a split of a second she captures and holds his gaze, then turns away and walks off the bridge.

Episode 86 (The Door)

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 *her*. There could only be one woman 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 devilish eyes of Angela Moreaux!

Jumping out of the boat and onto the slimy steps of the embankment, he slips but finds his balance and rushes up the bridge where a minute ago she stood. Quickly crossing it to the other side, he ends up in a dimly lit arcade. With Angela nowhere to be seen, Dmitry stops and listens.

Tuned in to the dark eerie night, he detects a soft echo of her footsteps receding into the depths of a passage. Following the sound, he soon catches up with her. Some distance still between them, she briskly walks down the narrow street. Keeping to the shadowy patches of the lane, he comes after her.

Dozens of twists and turns later, she finally arrives at a quiet angle of a canal where a three-storied, Venetian Gothic style building stands. Approaching the entrance she rings the doorbell and waits.

The door opens. A golden ray of light falls out and accentuates her silhouette. His eyes on the entrance, Dmitry moves into the shadows of a house on the opposite corner of the street. As she steps inside the building another figure becomes visible in the doorframe, 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 Angela 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 smoothly slides open.

Episode 87 (Sin)

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 a young man moving along its dimly lit corridor. As soon as the young man enters a large hall, a 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 clicks of high-heeled shoes on his marble staircase, the man in the mask turns his head towards the door. His golden eyes feverishly glowing, he watches a stunning brunette in a long coat walk into the room.

Her icy blue eyes locked on his, she slowly unbuttons her coat. Dropped to the floor, it reveals her stark naked body. Five pair of eyes transfixed on her, she stands there, a blood red smile on her face.

His sparkling golden 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 with our lustful intentions, we stare into each other eyes.

Coming close to me, he lifts his hand and lightly pressing, runs his finger across my crimson lips leaving smeared trails on either side of my mouth.

“My Trickster...” He whispers.

“My Dark Joy...” I echo, covering his mouth with my ‘joker’ rouge lips.

Episode 88 (Rider of the Storm)

Men were not cheered, for they have returned without victory. Their Queen was waiting... and her judgment was always ruthless. – 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 brunette, the red 'joker' smile on her face, lies on the luxurious fox rug, her luminescent porcelain body contrasts with its black shiny fur.

A man in a silk mask, a burning red candle in his hands, stands over her. Gazing down into her glaring stardust irises he recites:

"HE of Many Faces...HE of Many Eyes... HE wants you to shine once more..."

Kneeling down at the brunette's side, he bends over and draws a scarlet cross on her body 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 her porcelain skin, he puts the candle down and picks up a razor-edged knife. Parting her legs, he presses the blade to her skin and makes a small incision on the inside of her right thigh.

A slight burning sensation in the place of the cut, his hot lips on the wound, The Mask sucks the inside of my thigh then lifts his head and throws a lustful look at me. I moan and open my legs wider, inviting him in. He brings his face down and flicking his tongue starts caressing me. Varying his tempo, he roams around, exploring inside of me.

On the sumptuous black fur rug, the brunette ecstatically twists her body as the kneeling man in the silk mask eats her out. The moment her breath becomes deep and her gasps more frequent, he turns her around and bending her over, thrusts himself in.

Bending me over, The Mask presses hard within me. My back to him, his fingers twisted in my hair, I lustfully move in cadence with his body. My breath hoarse, his every thrust sends a new wave of ecstasy through my quivering body. Reaching the climax, I suddenly see images of an ancient land, where hundreds of naked men are kneeling down in front of an imposing altar. Sending their gazes full of hope and fear towards a dark haired Goddess, they feed her desires and sacrifice their souls adding 'jewels' to her dazzling monarchical tiara.

A powerful thunder bursts in the night skies of Venice crowning an orgasm of the stunning brunette with stardust eyes and porcelain skin, whose body is tightly entwined with the one of the man in the black silk mask, tinged in red.

Episode 89 (Fate)

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 colorful 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, a brunette, her hair wriggled in a divine mess on the pillow, is fast asleep. Her coat on the floor, her red high-heeled 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... Her eyes, the Joker face, the mysterious Gothic Palazzo, the path of glimmering in the dark candles...

His 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 colors 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... his cold fingers on my skin following a path of red wax drops... a kiss of darkness...

Suddenly feeling hungry, I get up and coming to an elegantly set table, grab a perfectly round apple from the fruit basket. As I plunge my teeth into its sweet flesh, my thoughts turn to Dmitry Voronov...

I take my mobile and dial his number.

Dmitry's mobile gently vibrates on the walnut bed table. Rolling over, he grabs it. Unknown Italian number... He hesitates a minute then answers the call and hears an excruciatingly familiar voice.

"Zdravstvui, Dmitry!"

"Zdrastvui, La!" He replies his voice slightly hoarse.

"Long time no see! I hear you are in Venice..." I remark crunching on my apple. Dmitry falls silent for a short while.

"I hear you are too, La." 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 hang up.

Episode 90 (San Marco)

She hones her knives with mysteries untold. She hones them and spoils my desires.

– D.R.

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 clicking, take hundreds of snapshots trying to capture the grandeur of Venetian buildings. Smeared 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. A brunette steps out into the corridor. The footsteps of the young man rapidly receding, she waits then

heads to the exit.

Making his way through the crowd of tourist gapers fussing with their cameras, 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 the brunette in the 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.

Scanning the *Piazzetta* one more time, Dmitry turns his gaze towards the lagoon. Suddenly he catches the sight of an elegant white motorboat. Transfixed, he watches it quickly approaching the pier. Reaching the embankment, it curves and slows down.

Directly before him, silhouetted in the golden rays of the setting sun, stands Angela Moreaux. A scarlet smile on her face, she stares at him from the boat. Rooted to the ground, Dmitry stares back, unable to take his eyes off her.

And as he finally makes a move forward, Angela swerves her boat, accelerates and zooms away.