

THE BALL

VOLUME 1: KULUANGWA

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...oyster does not know
to whom belongs its pearl.

- Confucius

“Come to the edge,” he said.
They answered: “We are afraid.”

“Come to the edge,” he said.

They came.

He pushed them...

...and they took off.

- Guillaume Apollinaire

PROLOGUE

“Mike! Mi-i-i-ike! Mi-i-i-ike! Come down to play football with us! Come on, you sleepy head!”

“Hey! You bo-o-o-oys, get away from my car! Do not lean against the car, devils! Step aw-a-a-ay from my-y-y ca-a-a-ar!”

“What are you yelling at the boys for, Rudolph Samuilovich!? Who needs your shitty ‘penny’? Hey Sasha, Mike is sleeping! He went fishing early in the morning with his father. They returned late. Go kick around without him. Come back after lunch, maybe he’ll be up by then. Or why won’t you play tomorrow – you’re on holiday anyway!”

“Okay, Aunt Rita!”

“Boys, get away from my car!”

CHAPTER 1

70° 4' 36" N
170° 51' 20" E

*Chaunsky District, Chukotka, Russian Federation
167 kilometers north of the village Vumalka*

November 4, 1997

...One hundred and twenty-seven... one hundred and twenty-eight... one hundred and twenty-nine... one hundred and thirty... Forgive me, I can't go on. Allow me to rest... just like yesterday, and maybe two days ago, or three... and, most likely, two hours ago. Who can keep track of this stalled time? And my path, stalled in these blizzards... After all, we're only people. And people are not sand – we can go against the wind while we have strength. I'm philosophizing again. Just shut up and move... one hundred and thirty-one, one hundred and thirty-two... A little more to one hundred and forty steps... and to sleep...

Dressed in overalls resembling a diving-suit made of papier-mâché, the man was trudging through a violent snowstorm, through the drifts, the bitter cold and impenetrable darkness, muttering under his breath words understandable only to him. Not looking ahead or to the sides, he walked as if on a tried and tested path. The wind tore away loose scraps of feathers out of the halls of his suit.

One hundred and thirty-three...

The man paused wearily. *Kuluangwa, let's agree that tomorrow I will walk seven more steps than today. Right now I must lie down, I just have to...*

Turning away from the wind, he clumsily fell sideways into a snow bank and tucked his knees in, firmly bracing himself with his hands, as if dreading to fall apart. The cyclone immediately began to cover his whole body with snow – his shoulders, his head in an odd, baggy hood, his legs in shapeless pants torn at the knees, and his strange-looking leather bag that was caught around his back by straps of leather.

One hundred and thirty-four...

With his ice-cold hands, the man ripped his paper suit at his chest and pulled out a black ball of thread. Or was this a coconut? No, this sphere was neither an object of folk art nor an exotic fruit. It was a black, slightly formless... football? Someone clearly had a bite of it. On its sides were grooves that could've originated from an invasion of diligent field mice. Also, there was a small round stamp with the image of a strange dancing man fringed by a braid of obscure characters. These kinds of stamps are used to sear cattle and horses before they join a herd.

One hundred and thirty-five...

The spherical object lived its life in the stiff hands of the traveler. It seemed as if it exuded hot air. The snow melted before it could reach the tired man, enveloping his chest, face, and weathered hands with white steam. The drifter threw his head back, releasing it from underneath the hood and revealing an emaciated face dried-up to the bones, a ragged beard, and colourless hair glued to his forehead. However, his sunken, discoloured eyes were full of light. With the fumbling fingers of his right hand, he sent a pinch of stinging snow to his mouth. He coughed. Once again, throwing his head back, he suddenly hit his neck on something hard and muttered, "...one hundred and thirty-six..." Turning abruptly with all his strength, the man began to dig out

the snow behind his head. Quickly, his fingers came upon the black basalt. Grabbing the ball with both hands, he pressed it against the cold stone and whispered, “Kuluangwa, my brother, look! We’ve come, my dear! You were right! This is your Big Land! I did it as you wanted - I did it! YOU did it!”

One hundred and thirty-seven... one hundred and thirty-eight... one hundred thirty-nine...

Tightly clenching the ball, he pressed his back to the basalt and wept. Meanwhile, a storm carrying tons of snow from the Chukchi Sea continued to form a snow-den around the traveler. Only his head and hands holding the ball on his chest remained uncovered. The ball continued to melt the snow around him. With a detached look, the wanderer looked into the snowy whirlwind over his head, in what was once the sky. His parched lips whispered, “You know what, tomorrow I will not go anywhere, brother Kuluangwa. The next one hundred forty paces you’ll have to roll yourself.” The wanderer sagged again and was coughing, but now from barking with laughter. *Thank you, my dear, for bringing me to this boulder... As Alexander Pushkin would say, “That’s where my grave lay...”* A gust of wind tore holes in the hood, releasing gray fuzz. Mingled with the snow, the fluff descended onto the surface of the black ball and suddenly became sparks in blue flame, like mosquitoes over an old kerosene lamp.

Burning right through the soaked-through paper-suit, the ball slowly melted into the traveler’s chest and pulled off the dry skin with an angry burn, exposing the poor man’s pink ribs. But the wanderer did not groan; he merely shuddered without stirring, shaking off the ashes of paper and downs. The man was dead. In his glass eyes, the snow storm fell apart for a moment, instead revealing a clear starry sky unexpectedly painted in emerald green. Then again, the blizzard closed the curtain and finally swept the motionless body. The ball, which was tightly pressed to the man’s corpse, slowly began to cool down and soon turned into a black, heavy rock.

One hundred and forty...

*Coast of the Chukchi Sea
Meanwhile*

“Hunting has become so bad here, although...”

“Another day or two of this kind of blizzard, and you can forget about hunting.”

“Just look at how heavy this storm is! It’s been a while since something like this.”

Two Evenks, in heavy, long-skirted reindeer suites, were talking inside a small dwelling quietly, as if afraid of frightening someone away. Their palms were reaching out to the hissing flames of the kudlik, oil lamp. Their narrow eyes gleamed with each oscillation of the flame. In a hole near the ceiling the wind was singing like the howling of wolves. It was cold. The rare snowflakes that made it inside by flying through the ceiling-hole hissed in the fire.

Suddenly, a hollow voice behind the stretched-skin wall woke up the reindeers. Two huskies in a corner pricked up their ears.

“What is it? There have never been bears or wolves here. I will go check it out.” One of the hunters crept out, nearly getting his rifle tangled in the domicile skins. Upon returning, he threw a couple of words to his companion: “In the morning, nevertheless, we must go. Have you seen the sky... it’s green. Freaking green! The storm is coming. The big storm.”

“Yes, this is a bad place...” said the second hunter while patting scruff huskies and squinting into the flames. “We’ll sleep now and take off in the morning. How are the animals?”

“C’mon, what the hell could happen to them?”

Just a few dozen steps remained for the unfortunate traveler to pass in order to reach the snow-covered domicile of the native nomads from the village of Vumalka.

The howl of the husky resonated: *Ouuuuu-aah-oo-oo-oo-oo!*

CHAPTER 2

20° 40' 25" N

88° 34' 31" W

Chichen-Itza, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico

October 2, 1520

Ouuuuu-aah-oo-oo-oo-oo!... Her eyelids parted heavily. But the picture before her eyes was indistinct. There were yellow-green flashes, flashes of light through the milky haze of age. She did not immediately realize why she was awakened, whether it was because of the deaf groans from the depths of the hut or from ordinary kicks in the womb. The kicks have recently become more frequent. The child felt the lack of water in the mother's womb and demanded liquid. This will be Tolana's first childbirth, but she did not know how to soothe a fragile fruit. Her husband's mother, Ma-Is, was an old woman and could barely move a leg. Surprisingly, she was still on her feet! Almost all of her peers were old women, who were teachers of the tribe and supervised the tribe's younglings. One after another, these women simply dried up in the eyes of Tolana over the past three weeks. Each morning, they hung out coloured blankets at the doors of their huts, giving the sign that they are still alive. Then they went back inside and lay motionless in the dry vacuum until sunset. Where no signal was hoisted, the priest of the tribe of Vak Balama sent two warriors. Wrapped in blankets, the dead were carried past the Place of One Thousand Columns and past the Temple of Chtuloq to the end of the cornfield that had not harvested crops. The bodies were cast and covered by piles of stone to prevent wild animals, mad from heat, hunger and thirst, from ripping apart the corpses. Every corpse lay on top of old graves, and again everything was buried by stones. A foul stench was all around. The warriors covered up their faces, leaving only a slit for the eyes.

At night, the burial mound was surrounded by burning torches, cries scared off animals, the trunks of dead trees were beaten by beetles, and drums were banged.

Tolana woke up every morning before dawn, carefully straightened her shoulders and clasped her hands at the waist, making steps like a duck to go to a thicket near the village surrounding the city wall to collect the dew drops on the broad leaves of *ol-ka-hyo*. Large drops were shaken off into the flat clay dish, while small drops were simply licked by the tongue. An hour later, the tongue swelled. And so – every morning for the past four moons was like this. There was no other water.

The child inside her demanded water and food. He wanted to live. According to the prediction of the old grandmother, not much time was left until its birth – only two moons. Walking became increasingly difficult for Tolana. Initially, she could reach the Sacred Cenote by carefully treading barefoot on stone-like scorched earth. She approached the edge of the sinkhole and stared intently into its depths. Has the water come – have the gods become kind? But the same sweet smell of rotting corpses hit her nostrils – the poor girls, among which was her just little sister. Tolana was taken aback by disgust, felt sick, and in recent days threw off her trips to the dead cenote.

She wanted to immediately go collect the morning moisture from the leaves, but the sun was already high, and Tolana realized that she overslept. She felt her tongue being torn by sharp pain. Caressing her face with the palm of her hand, she felt the scab of dried blood. Two fingers reaching the swollen tongue, Tolana touched the scar in the middle. Although it had healed, each

movement of the tongue caused pain. Pain was also present in her large stomach, already beginning to sink down – a sign of labour approaching. Tolana leaned her head, moving it side to side, trying to shake off the numbness and restore the events of yesterday. Pain anywhere else did not respond, as it lived only in the stomach and at the tip of her tongue.

Gentle rustling and moaning made her look around, and Tolana recognized their source – in the corner of the hut, on old rags and covered with a striped blanket, her husband, Kuluangwa, was moaning. The entire lower part of the blanket was covered in spots of dried blood. Kuluangwa lay on his back and hazily whispered something. Tolana stooped below to parse the words of her husband.

“Tomorrow... everything will be fine! Vak Balama said that, remember? Tomorrow will rain... Chaak has drunk. We did it... He is now satisfied. He shall give us water. He should... our child.” The man’s voice broke and died.

“Yes, Kuluangwa,” said Tolana, barely moving her swollen tongue.

She put her head on her husband’s chest and closed her eyes. Memories of yesterday flashed in her head. She remembered the parable that the high priest Vak Balama told them yesterday in the temple.

The path chosen by other tribes was one of defeat, giving away all that they had under their chests and armpits, so that it would blossom. Such a bloom meant that each tribe that was brought as sacrifice for Chaak had their hearts ripped out. But before that, Chaak conveyed his powers to the Balama clan – Balama-Quitzé, Balama-Aqaba and Iki-Balama... my glorious ancestors. He transmits this force up until now, and this power has never deceived us. We are accustomed to abstain from food while expecting the appearance of dawn. We are awake, waiting for sunrise. We guard the Great Star that rises first before the sun, when the day is engaged. Our gaze is fixated on there, the sunrise. There, from whence came our gods.

But, that was not where we got our power and sovereignty. We conquered and subdued the large tribes and small tribes, when we offered them in sacrifice to Chaak and the Holy Grain. We offered him the blood, flesh, chest and armpits of all those people in order to water and to revive the Holy Grain. And a great power has come to us. Great was our wisdom, when we accomplished our deeds in the dark. But then came a time when Chaak demanded more. It was not enough for the Holy Grain of Chaak. Our offerings were not enough for the one of the six sacred grains that He brought to our land. And He said to me – and I to you: “Children of the Corn, express your gratitude before your last exodus! Do what is necessary: prick your ears, pierce your loins, and commit your sacrifice! That will be your gratitude in front of me - and I will repay you.” And I, Vak Balama, your priest, tell you: it is time to do everything that Chaak wants for the irrigation and flowering of the Holy Grain.

Tolana also remembered for how long, how very long, she dragged Kuluangwa on the narrow steps down from the top of the temple. She remembered how hard the child fought in her womb, resisting every strain of the mother. The warm hands of old Ma-Is helped drag Kuluangwa into the hut, put his limp body into the corner on a low couch and covered him with a blanket. But what came before this? Her memory was confused and events were not restored. Kuluangwa was breathing hoarsely, while Tolana’s head ascended and descended with his every sigh. Then he stretched with a groan, exhaling pain, straightening his muscles that had stiffened at night. The blanket harbouring his body slipped to the floor and Tolana looked up, not fully realizing what had opened in front of her. She suddenly gasped. What she saw made her tightly

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shut her eyes. Kuluangwa's entire lower body was covered with scabs of dried blood – his legs, hips, ankles, and feet. A large, ugly, black and red body part faintly trembled between his legs like a sponge. What once took an active part in the tender and the creation of a small creature in her womb had turned into an unimaginable nightmare. And Tolana recalled yesterday.

CHAPTER 3

34° 38' 17" S

58° 21' 12" W

Buenos Aires, Argentina

October 14, 1972

The day was drawing to an end.

“Diego! Diego, what is it with you! Why don’t you ever listen to your mother! You’ll smash your head in such darkness. How much longer can you fool around? Come home right now... ri-i-i-ight no-o-o-ow!”

There was no answer.

“Die-e-e-ego!”

“Give me a moment, mama! Well, until the next goal, ‘cause we’re tied!

“So you’ll be rushing around till the morning?”

“Nope, we’re gonna finish soon!”

The mother walked away from the third floor window, taking with her the faded laundry that had been baking under the merciless sun on a rope crossing Santo Domingo Street. Downstairs, in the darkness illuminated only by the dim lights of a few windows, a throng of teenagers was chasing a ball, excitedly shouting something ungodly. This game, already lasting dozens of halves, started in mid-afternoon, from the moment school finished. The boys played in the yard among the crowded block houses, the walls of which were completely covered with graffiti. Here and there, the facades were clung onto by tin shacks – pantries for all sorts of junk, garages for broken trucks, motorcycles, and bikes. Between the huts as well – dried up laundry. The boys’ game was accompanied by a cacophony of screaming traders, roaring babies, rattling cars, melodies of bossa-nova and sounds of salsa.

*Jamas imagine que llegaria este dia
donde apostaria yo toda mi vida,
por amarte y por hablarte otra vez
pero que diablos ya perdi todo mi tiempo,
y por mis errores ahora estoy sufriendo
quisiera regresar.
Pero antes de andar y salir
de tu vida y andar solo
quisiera llorar y sacarme
de adentro tus besos tu cuerpo...*

On one side, the goalposts were represented by a dusty gateway arch overgrown with stunted vines. On the other side – a pair of empty boxes. The short kid who responded to the call of his mother seemed to have played the best in this poor neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Taking the ball to his chest, he easily moved it from his torn knee to the shin. Smoothly beating the opponent, the boy made a masterly kick to send the ball rocketing between the two boxes.

“Go-o-o-al!” One group of boys rushed to hug the striker, while the other stood in silence at the gate, rolling the ball.

Meanwhile, the capital of Argentina was descending into a warm October night.

“You shouldn’t be like this to him, Dalma,” said Diego, the boy’s father, in whose honour the child was named. He came from behind and gently put his arm around his wife’s shoulders.

“After that adventure of yours with him in Mexico, he’s crazy on that football.” Dalma nervously freed herself from his arm, “You know, he even sleeps with that stupid ball in an embrace. Our little Mary sleeps with her doll! But at his age, he shouldn’t be sleeping with toys!”

“Well, he is still a child. Ten years – what do you want?” Diego paused. “Incidentally, yesterday I spoke with Antonio Labruna, the schoolmaster.”

“Yes, I know Antonio!” retorted Dalma. “So what?”

“Well, he said that... in general, our little guy is doing very badly at school...”

“Oh, is that it?”

“... But on the other hand, in football,” the father continued, “he is very good! A genius! Antonio wants to put him on the senior school team for city competitions. You remember how he was bullied like a little chicken a year ago because he couldn’t put together two movements with the ball in gym class. And now...”

“...And now our boy surpassed himself by kicking a stupid ball around the street!” She said with disappointment, “We need him to spend more time on the important subjects. Yet you continue to indulge him...”

“Don’t you worry so much, Dalma! Everything will be alright. Our boy will fulfill his dream. You’ll see – he’ll become a hero of Argentina!”

Dalma grunted, while Diego went on, fascinated, despite the sarcasm in the look of his wife. “We, the working people always need football! It makes us free! It elevates our mood, provides food for an evening of chatter with a glass of wine. By the way, let me open a bottle for dinner! It’s better than grumbling and frowning all the time. And all the sciences will eventually come to Diego with time. He’ll learn how to read and write.”

“It would also be good if at least he learned to count,” again hemmed the mother, “so he doesn’t end up like his father, who has nothing in his pockets to count. Yes, and you’re babbling about football like at some rally. ‘Football makes us free!’ Ugh! I almost fell asleep!”

“Alright, alright, I’ll talk to him,” gave in Diego, seeing what Dalma was getting at.

At this point, little Diego clumsily stumbled through door. He was a sturdy child of short height for his ten years of age, covered in dust and with eyes glowing. His left hand firmly pressed a black ball against himself.

“Papa, papa! Mama! Five – three! We finished them!” Diego was raging with pride.

“But you said, up until the first goal...” His mother frowned with displeasure. “I warmed your dinner twice!”

“Yes, I rolled them a fourth, and then, while thinking to leave or not, I sent a fifth to the right. And then, Aunt Samantha turned off the light in her window... I couldn’t see my ball, so we had to go home.”

“And who scored the first three, son?” his father asked with a sly smile.

“Also me, papa. Who else?”

Dalma seemed to have replaced her anger with compassion, going into the kitchen and warming dinner for a third time. The father patted Diego’s curly head and leaned to his ear, quietly, conspiratorially whispering: “Central striker Diego Gonzalez, while mama is busy with dinner, I have something for you.”

Slipping through the dark corridor past the door into the kitchen where his mother rattled dishes and cursed as she dispersed the smoke from the stove, they entered Diego's small room, hung with pictures from covers of sports magazines. The father closed the door and said, "Maybe it's time you stopped kicking around," he started from afar, "this filthy, old, black ball, of dark Mexican origins?"

"But, papa..." Diego cringed at the thought of being deprived of his single favorite preoccupation.

"Do not even start," the father went on in a deliberately strict manner.

"But why? I promise that I will do my homework on time. I won't ever skip school. I promise! I promise! I promise!" Big tears flowed down his face.

"Oh! I never knew that you could cry!" The father chuckled, "Alright, don't howl, I just wanted to say that you've played enough with this prehistoric ball, Diego. Why don't you look under your bed? I think there is something waiting for you now for four hours!"

Diego gave his father a suspicious glance and crawled under the bed, from where a moment later came out a hysterical cry of joy.

"Olé! Olé! Olé-é-é-é! Thank you, papa!"

Like a brisk snake, he crawled out from under the bed and his trembling hands lay a football, covered in shiny black and white hexagons.

"It's real! Leather! The guys will be so pleased. Maybe our team will even be allowed to play on a real field now!"

The father, still pretending to have a stern face, said, "But you must promise your mother and I that this will not harm your schooling! And especially – mathematics."

"Of course, papa," Diego was barely listening to him as he swept into the kitchen, "Mama, ma-a-a-ma-a-a, look what I have! Papa gave me this, a ball from real leather!"

"I hope you won't have any more problems at school. Understand?" The mother tried to sound resolute, "Now go wash your hands, you little monkey... with so-o-o-ap!"

"Yes, mama, I promise!"

"What is the matter with your hand?" She grabbed Diego's wrist, as he was about to slip by. Dried blood protruded along the edges of the dark plaster glued over his entire left palm. "Your sore has still not healed? Tomorrow we go to the doctor, my uncle Savigna. What is this? Three weeks have passed, but the cut has not healed! You can easily catch an infection! How are you going to play without your hands?"

"But I play using my legs," responded the central striker with an infectious boyish laugh as he headed to bathe.

There, left alone, and furtively glancing at the door, Diego grimaced as he ripped the dirty plaster. Then, his face turned pale and serious as he washed the wound in the cold running tap water and, raising his hand closer to the face, looked at it carefully. Indeed, the wound began to tighten. The boy dabbed it with a piece of toilet paper, which quickly turned into a faint pink colour. Diego quivered his hand, brushing a momentary stupor, and pasted the plaster back into place. Then with both hands he "combed" his rough curls, showed himself in the mirror his pink tongue and to his mother's "Di-e-e-ego!" he shouted back: "I'm coming, ma-a-a!"

CHAPTER 4

*To: Head of Intelligence Directorate
General Staff of the Red Army
General I.I. Ilichev*

*Head of Second Chief Directorate, C/A №174
Lieutenant K.M. Litvinov
Anglo-American Residence*

November 27, 1942

OPERATIONAL REPORT

Comrade General,

Our resident “Rockwood” revealed that the object of interest to us was present during the so-called “Baltimore Experiment.” It is established that the agency “Nixon, Kraft and Locksmith,” presented by Mr. Morgan, had a contract with the U.S. military for the supply of sensitive equipment. On the day of the experiment, Mr. Tesla was secretly brought by the secret service agency “Tangerine” to the port of Baltimore from New York on a five-seat plane (reg. number 685-AS).

“Baltimore Experiment” (for your reference):

According to our data, the U.S. military attempted to build a ship invisible to the enemy’s radar and magnetic mines. Using the calculations made by Mr. Einstein, the destroyer “Aldridge” was installed with special generators. To our knowledge, the project attracted Mr. Tesla. His participation in the experiment was highly confidential. The reason that the participation of Mr. Tesla was given a higher degree of secrecy confirms our hypothesis that Mr. Tesla used an unknown mechanism of his own invention in the experiment. In addition, we know that a high degree of activity of Abwehr, the German counterintelligence agency, was aimed not at the outcome of the experiment, but at the object that Mr. Tesla brought aboard the destroyer.

During the test conducted on Oct. 28, 1942 in dock no. 4 in Baltimore, two things happened: the ship, surrounded powerful electromagnetic field discharges, not only disappeared from the radar screen, but literally vanished in the truest sense of the word in a green cloud. After some time, “Aldridge” appeared again, but in another place, at the exit into the water near dock no. 12. The crew on board was utterly distraught, in the opinion of doctors.

Our agents have interviewed all possible witnesses to the experiment. In particular (for a bribe of 465 dollars), we received the most interesting testimony from senior sailor Mr. Ramirez Allende from the transport ship “Andrew Furuseth” – a vessel that was part of the control group of the Baltimore experiment. Allende personally saw how “Aldridge” melted in a strange, greenish glow to the sound of a buzz surrounding the destroyer’s force field. Other witnesses indicated that immediately after the discovery of the ship, Special Forces were thrown on board to block all approaches to the ship and all exits on board. Soon after, a speedboat brought a man (Allende’s photograph identifies him with exact certainty as Mr. Tesla). The man was

immediately escorted to the bridge, from which he returned shortly. He was carrying a metal suitcase in his hands. While descending back into the high-speed boat, according to Allende, the man (Mr. Tesla) suddenly exclaimed "Oh, shit!" as if from a burn and let his bag out of his hands, throwing it aside. The bag opened and a small ball rolled onto the deck; this object radiated a striking green glow, like a fire welding. The glow lasted for several seconds, and then stopped. Gunmen accompanying Mr. Tesla put the ball away in a metal box. A trace of burnt wood was clearly visible on the deck of the ship.

The most interesting item in Allende's testimony to our agent was the description of the effects of the experiment. Some incredible things have been happening to the men that returned "from nowhere." They seemed to have fallen out of the real course of time (the term "frozen" was used). There were cases of spontaneous combustion. Two of the "frozen" men suddenly ignited and burned for eighteen days. Despite all efforts, rescuers in the hospital were unable to stop the burning of the bodies. There were also other oddities: for example, one of the sailors of "Aldridge" disappeared forever, having passed straight through the wall of his apartment in front of his wife and child. We cannot confirm these data, as it is likely that Allende exaggerated some of the testimony to receive more money.

According to agent "Rockwood," the U.S. Navy leadership denies the Baltimore Experiment, claiming that nothing of such nature occurred in Baltimore in 1942. However, we found documents showing that Mr. Einstein has been in the employ of the U.S. Navy Department in Washington this year. We have copies of the leaflets with the calculations made by hand by Mr. Einstein, who has a very distinctive handwriting. (The copies are translated and forwarded to the Second Division of the GRU).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Carl Laysler – a physicist, one of the scientists who worked on this project – has been in our employ since receiving the assignment. Laysler, according to our information, told a closed Congressional hearing on the case that U.S. military scientists planned to make a warship invisible to radar. A powerful electronic device was installed on board this ship. This device was able to give energy, the power of which was enough to supply electricity to a small-sized city. We have a verbatim transcript of the explanation:

... The experiment is very interesting, but terribly dangerous. It has too much influence on the people involved in it. The experiment used magnetic generators – the so-called "demagnetizers," which worked at resonant frequencies and created a powerful field around the ship. In practice, this could give a temporary withdrawal from our dimension and might mean a spatial breakthrough, if only it was possible to keep the process under control!

Interestingly, Laysler has never seen this device. However, he gives the idea that it would have taken up at least one-third of the vessel's area. Nevertheless, he did not see a single loading of large-scale electrical equipment take place on board.

The intent of the experiment was for a very strong electromagnetic field around the ship to serve as a screen for radar beams. Laysler was located on the shore to watch, record, and monitor the experiment. When the device was running, the ship disappeared. Sometime later, it reappeared, but all the sailors on board were dead. Some of their corpses turned into steel - the

material from which the ship was made. During our conversation, Laysler was very upset and it was evident that the sick old man still feels responsibility and guilt for the death of the seamen on board “Aldridge.” Laysler and his colleagues on the experiment consider that they “sent the ship to a different time, with the vessel breaking up into molecules, and in the inverse process there was a partial replacement of organic molecules of human bodies by metal atoms...” We have proposed a theory that Mr. Tesla may have participated in the project as a possible owner of the device, but Laysler categorically denied this. According to Laysler, the military did not inform the team of scientists involved in the project of who was the manufacturer of the device.

One week after the experiment, “Aldridge” was put into reserve by the U.S. Navy. The logbooks of “Aldridge” disappeared. To our knowledge, they are in the ownership of the 7th Operational Department of the CIA.

Lt. Col. K.M. Litvinov

RESOLUTION (upper left corner, ink, partially eroded by water)

*Immediately start operat... actions, ...clarifying... ...details of the Baltim... Expe...t. Confirm... facts and agents at our disposal... ...rmation associated with the activit... ola Tesla in the... ...military ...rces of the U.S. to the exper...
Report ...personally, daily.
I.I. Ilichev*

CHAPTER 5

45° 27' 57" N

9° 11' 21" E

Milan, Italy

May 1991

The traffic jam seemed endless. Even if taking into account that it happened in one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, in the capital of Italian and world fashion, sitting in this sticky, hot, polluted air did not bring much pleasure.

*Soli
la pelle come un vestito
soli
mangiando un panino in due
io e te
soli
le briciole nel letto
soli
ma stretti un po' 'di piu'
solo io solo tu*

The melodic song playing from the broken car radio, performed by a hoarse-voiced man and a bevy of beauties, did not brighten the trip either. Choking in the old Fiat of God knows what color and year, with stains of coffee and red wine as well as something unknown and repulsive on the formerly-velvet backseat, Rodion Karlovich Teichrib concluded that he was going to be late for his flight. Even in the best-case scenario, if at the behest of all the sleeping saints in Milan the highway to Malpensa Airport will immediately clear up, he still would not make it for Alitalia flight 560 to Moscow. This meant that his colleague, translator and assistant, Sergei Tikholapov, who had left to the airport two hours ago, will have to fly to Moscow alone.

The Twenty-Ninth Symposium of the European Society of Historians, held as always under the patronage of the Royal Society of Historians of Great Britain, was traditionally held in the old European cities: London, Amsterdam, Brussels, Lisbon. In late spring of 1991, that city was Milan.

Not yet an old man at fifty-four years of age and part of the so-called “new wave” of the perestroika era, Professor Rodion Karlovich Teichrib had early-grizzled curly hair and large eyes under similarly large and thick horn-rimmed spectacles. Among the students of the Moscow State University’s Faculty of History he went by the respectable nickname of “Doctor Zhivago.” The Faculty of History of the Moscow State University was the leader of the subject area in the Soviet Union, known for exhaustingly covering both geographical and chronological historical reality, and in fact – all of human history. A dozen departments and a few hundred faculty members, including Rodion Karlovich, taught history in a fundamental way, with its own school and traditions. Even the study of the history of the Communist Party introduced in the thirties did not affect the quality of education. Repression of the professorial staff in these years only partially affected the university. The school remained a School.

Rodion Karlovich taught in two departments – history and art of archeology and ethnology as well as ancient fine arts. The image of “Doctor Zhivago” was complemented by the fact that he carried all of his documents, books and notebooks in an old doctor’s bag, which he inherited from his grandfather through his father. Such was the professorial dynasty of the “bag-carriers.”

The “Vesnin Brothers,” responsible for producing this daily necessity of a doctor as well as other suitcases and attributes for wealthy travelers in the early nineteenth century, did not spare the finest pigskins in the creation of their products, being such a benign manufacturer. The brown sides of the bag, obliterated by century of tear and wear, had about a dozen small holes covered by bronze studs. So, with tight enclosure and long-term storage, the contents of the travelling bag did not dampen or suffocate. The lock made by “Vesnin Brothers” was so strong and shrewd that it would be envied by any modern travel lock. However, its key came only in one copy. The professor once tried to order a duplicate – yes, as if it were possible! Upon seeing the manufacturer brand, no master took the task. “*Hold on to it like the apple of an eye, but if you lose it, the sides of the bag would have to be cut open, ruining such a fine product!*” But even this would be hard to do because the sides of the doctor’s travelling bag were reinforced with whalebone. That's why Rodion Karlovich only took the key with him when he went on business trips, which had been recently becoming more often. Even when handing his bag over at check-in counters, he did not bother to have it wrapped around by plastic to protect it from the baggage handlers of Sheremetyevo Airport that were known for their autopsies of expensive suitcases arriving from capitalist countries. Firstly, this type of travelling bag did not look as polished as most of his fellow travelers’, and secondly, breaking it open would need too much force. The rest of the time, during lectures and hours spent in the dilapidated Lenin library, the key awaited the professor in the bachelor two-bedroom apartment that he shared with his mother, not far from the Kropotkinskaya metro station.

Smiling and showing large teeth, the lenses of his glasses gleaming, Rodion Karlovich talked in a quiet, but firm, tone of voice, forcing the audience to stop whispering and carefully delve into his lectures. As a relatively young, extremely well-read and “new”-thinking teacher, he did not suffer from a lack of attention from his students. Many of them idolized him and sometimes even escaped from other classes to listen to the “advanced” lectures of Dr. Zhivago.

In the midst of perestroika, a new wave of contacts was made with foreign universities interested in promoting “progressive thinking” in the USSR, which became increasingly popular in the West (from *matryoshka* dolls and Paul McCartney’s “Back in the USSR” to nuclear technology), opening more doors to the young professors of the land of the Soviets. This allowed Rodion Karlovich to visit six countries in the past three years alone. Previously, one could only dream of such trips, not to mention the expenses covered by host nations.

And here he was, sitting in the Milanese taxi on the road to the airport, with a wandering smile, recalling a conversation about him in a small pizzeria on Via Cappellini with his young colleague and translator, Sergei Tikholapov. Rodion Karlovich caught himself thinking that he was continuing to test his knowledge of the amazing object that he acquired for ten lira. Actually, it only cost him a payment for a bus ride with a half-blind Italian rag-picker, whom he named in his mind as “Giuseppe Blue-nose.”

Here is what happened. Having successfully broken away from the “tourist group” (or rather, from the delegation of professors and lecturers from the countries of the former socialist bloc and the elderly guide, a Jewish immigrant, who seemingly spoke in all the languages of the world), and chuckling to himself that this whole episode obscenely reminded him of a scene from the 1960s comedy, *The Diamond Arm*, professor Rodion Karlovich slipped into the

shadows of the small and prosperous Via Plinio. A couple of times, he covered his tracks by entering small souvenir shops, sorting in his pockets for coins given to him as subsistence by the Committee of Assistance to Eastern European Nations. Finally, he found himself at the corner of that same Via Plinio and Piazza Lima.

It'd be nice to study the outskirts of Milan too, as not only do its palaces make Milan beautiful, but its people too, thought Rodion Karlovich, looking around and squinting at the bright sun-lit street, *or else I might as well spend my whole trip in classrooms and at conferences.* It was at this moment that he felt some sort of hollow ringing in his head, which after a moment turned into a dull ache in the left brow. He stopped and firmly pressed the palm of his hand to his brow, then rubbed his temple. However, the pain was not only not gone, but it intensified. He even put his head in his hands, remembering how Mueller taught Stirlitz to deal with migraines in the film *Seventeen Moments of Spring*.

What the hell? Removing his glasses, he gave a tired and bewildered look at the suddenly deserted street. At a bus stop not far away, sat a lonely old man in a plaid flannel shirt, a blue velvet waistcoat and a worn-out cap, with his tanned hands peacefully resting on his knees.

Rodion Karlovich slowly approached this elderly man of small stature and a narrow face with a long, bluish nose, and without even thinking how to explain himself he knocked on his own forehead with two fingers and, wincing, asked: "Pharmacy, where is *farmacia*? Analgene... head – *testa... testa bo-bo* very much – *testa malate!* Devil may break a leg of this damn Italian!" The old man, as if expecting this question, got up from the plastic bench and promptly waved his dry blotchy hand, inviting Rodion Karlovich into a shabby, impossibly dusty city bus that pulled to the curb out of nowhere.

Ostensibly hypnotized, the professor entered the empty salon and collapsed next to the old man in the seat behind the driver. Bus no. 64W immediately started moving, snorting out exhaust with displeasure. The driver turned to the old man, looked into his eyes and shook his head: "This one?" Blue-nose just nodded his head.

CHAPTER 6

55° 46' 12" N

36° 39' 21" E

Moscow, Russian Federation

September 7, 1994

“This one?”

“What do I know?”

“This dude isn’t quite dead yet...”

“Aha! They don’t want dead ones. Remember the last dude? They finally let him go...”

“Yeah, let him go... into the Moscow River.”

The two square-headed and thick-necked thugs, dressed in expensive suits of the latest fashion, stopped at the corner of Podkolokolny and Malo Ivanovo alleys. With undisguised contempt, they were looking intensely at a dry, dirty man. He sat with his back to a water pipe, pursing his thin legs. The tricot was torn at his knees. Dirty, swollen, dressed in rags, he was begging passersby for something in his incoherent, tongue-tied speech. But the passersby only hurriedly ran past him, some bouncing off to the side for fear of catching some tuberculosis, pediculosis, or “even something worse.”

One of the “suits” drew a pair of white latex gloves from his pocket, busily pulled them on his hairy hands, and pushed the elbow of his associate, quietly muttering, “Alright, we take this one. We’ve been shaking down gateways for two hours. And I’m hungry like a dog! If he won’t be the right one, then the hell with him – the river will wash him away like the others...”

“Wait, I’ll put a cover on the seat... God forbid that son a bitch will stink up my car.” He turned and quickly headed to the man standing not far from the black jeep.

Meanwhile, the first “suit” sat down in front of the homeless man and shook his bony shoulder. The hobo raised his eyelids heavily and with his bright blue, unreflective eyes looked at the stranger. He was not too old. Rather, it was impossible to tell his age without ridding his face of the stubble he had grown over many days, washing the dirt off him, and feeding him properly. He was still in his thirties.

“I’m not well, brother,” he rasped through dry, parched, blue lips, “I can’t breathe... my pipes are burning!”

“Well, that’s fixable, chap. How do we call you, miserable?” asked the “suit” deliberately in a good-natured and merry tone.

“I’m Oleg. Oleg Pervushin.”

“Here’s what, Oleg Pervushin, look here, brother – I’m going to patch you up for a little case. At my hacienda. It’s not for nothing, you hear! I’ll get your pipes cleaned and feed you and get you dressed, bro. The whole deal!” He smiled wryly and depicted a graceful movement with his white-gloved fingers. Then, still smiling, he pulled from his jacket pocket a 250-mL bottle of “Moskovskaya,” pulled off the silver cap, and placed the warm bottle into the trembling hand of Oleg Pervushin. As if long expecting such a turn of events, Oleg took three big gulps in exactly three seconds, consuming the entire contents of the bottle, making his savior whistle with admiration. Gently burping, Oleg again leaned back against the drainpipe. After a few long moments, his cheeks began to show colour, his breathing leveled off, and he opened his eyes to look at the stranger in full consciousness.

“Well, what do you want, dear,” said Oleg with a little drawl, “Take me, lock, stock and barrel. If you like, I’ll plow your land, and dig up a well, and cut down trees for a sauna, and...”

“No, no, *Oleshka*,” interrupted his companion, “I want you to, well, work as a watchman for me. You know how much scum is around right now, climbing in windows, stealing, and they can even burn you. Well, maybe, you can be a courier for our office. Like, you know, bring this, take that...”

“What, the post doesn’t work?”

“Yes, it works. But we don’t need its services. I suppose you know, every second package – bye-bye. It’s not around Moscow you have to deliver them, but from far away. From all, so to speak, corners of our great motherland. Well, that’s it – c’mon, let’s go. Details – later.”

“Drugs or something?”

“God forbid, who do you hold me for? I’m one of yours, I’m a bourgeois,” insisted the bull. The joke sounded out of place.

He helped the homeless man up. Only some of the very few passersby still out at this late evening hour paid any attention at how an expensively-dressed man held a foul street beggar by the arm and seated him into a luxury foreign car. The right back door slammed, and Oleg fell on the soft leather seat, which was covered its entire length by a sheet of transparent plastic. The car slowly pulled away, sharply honking at clumsy, crooked Ladas, and with its tires squealing, raced up the Malo Ivanovo alley of Moscow. Eyeing the big city lights from a window of the expensive car, Oleg was sweetly falling asleep. At one turn, he even fell to the squeaky polyethylene, curled up and fell asleep, resting his unshaven cheek on his dirty fist. Meanwhile, the car’s stereo system blasted a Nautilus Pompilius rock hit at full bass:

*If you drink with thieves,
Be afraid for your wallet,
If you walk on a muddy road,
You cannot avoid soiling your feet...*

“Just turn off that nonsense.”

“What’s wrong? It’s their last album – cool stuff!

“What’s so cool? If you drink with thieves – *don’t* be afraid for your wallet! *Don’t* be afraid! – you got it?”

CHAPTER 7

*To: Head of Intelligence Directorate
General Staff of the Red Army
General I.I. Ilichev*

December 4, 1942

OPERATIONAL REPORT

Comrade General!

As part of operation “Trigger,” I offer you the latest intelligence information, analysis, archival documents and historical references. We also found that the OGPU organs, and in particular the Deputy Chairman of the OGPU – G.G. Yagoda, were already interested in the subject in 1931.

*FROM THE INTELLIGENCE ARCHIVES OF THE 7th BRANCH OF THE GENERAL STAFF
OF THE TSARIST ARMY*

July 27, 1902

*From the ciphered reports of the Russian Embassy resident in the U.S., Joseph Grabbe
To the Head of the 7th Branch of the General Staff, Gen. V.A. Tselebrovsky
Copy sent to the Russian Ambassador to the United States, Mr. R.R. Rosen*

Your Excellency,

With the help of our agent at the central post office in Colorado Springs, we have received a copy of a letter from Mr. Tesla to Mr. Johansson in New York regarding our matter of interest. I bring to your attention the translation of the highlights of this document:

Dear friend!

...in the “doodles” of the high electromagnetic discharge instrument made on the basis of a familiar object to you, “Trigger,” I came across a “thought.”

...dear Johansson, soon you will be able to read your poems to Homer himself! Meanwhile, I will be discussing my findings with the great Archimedes. Give me time, and I will send you a copy of my research diary, and you will see for yourself that I am not sick in the head, as many around me are already beginning to assume. Unfortunately, even Mr. Morgan, my good financial backer, is also beginning to lean towards this view. All that excited him was my successful experiment with the disappearance of the old power generator in Philadelphia, as well as the presence of my most important – his, Mr. Morgan’s – incredible object, a round catalyst (which he jokingly calls a “ball of Gods,” and I – “trigger”). Some other time, I will write to you in detail how he jumped and slapped his thighs when I showed him the green electromagnetic waves, unbelievably resembling a fog, which appeared during the disappearance in Philadelphia. I held the

ball in my outstretched hand, and it lit up in my hands like a little sun of cold and lifeless plasma.

Your Excellency, we have also found that after returning from Colorado Springs, Mr. Tesla informed journalists of the Herald Tribune that he had established contact with extraterrestrial civilizations. Few took this statement seriously. However, there are indications that Mr. Tesla is continuing his investigation of “parallel worlds” by himself, with the help of the object of our interest, without publicizing any of the results. He discusses all of his experiments only personally with Mr. Morgan during garden walks or in a completely closed laboratory that does not give us the opportunity to listen and learn the contents of their conversations. During their garden walks, Mr. Tesla and Mr. Morgan sometimes play with a ball (that is, the “subject” of our interest). The dimensions of this ball do not exceed 5-7 inches in diameter. They play the so-called English football, which is now becoming in vogue in Russia. At all other times while on the territory observed by us, Mr. Tesla does not part with the ball at any moment.

The report of our scientific consultants concludes that Mr. Tesla uses the subject known as “trigger” to make machinery for altering the electromagnetic vibrations of his own brain. In other words, he uses the ball to control his mental activity, and thus he can communicate with time-shifted realities. I also report that the German intelligence is keenly interested in Mr. Tesla’s activities. In particular, a certain Mr. Krauser entered employ as a part-time assistant at Mr. Tesla’s laboratory; to our knowledge, Mr. Krauser is an agent of the German General Staff’s intelligence organ.

Mr. Tesla is decisively transferring his work to Long Island. Thus, in order to speed up our work, I am requesting your sanction for the possibility of extraction and subsequent copying of Mr. Tesla’s research records as well as the actual “trigger” – by any means necessary, including extreme measures.

Taking into account the importance of this object to the interests of the Russian state, we will inform you immediately upon receipt of new information.

*First Deputy Russian Envoy to the North American United States
Joseph C. Grabbe*

The extraction of the subject of interest and of Mr. Tesla’s archive using extreme measures is strictly prohibited. Find an opportunity to obtain the materials via other means. Embed our agents in all accessible communication channels of Mr. Tesla. Report personally to myself and General V.A. Tselebrovsky on any new developments concerning Mr. Tesla.

*7th Dep’t of the 1st Division of the 2nd Quartermaster-General of the General Staff
General N.S. Ermolov*

*1st (Military-statistical) Division of the 2nd Quartermaster-General of the General Staff
To: General A.P. Simonov
August 23, 1914*

MEMORANDUM

Your Excellency,

I bring to your attention the mood of the intelligence officers of the General Staff.

Russia's defeat in the war with Japan revealed significant shortcomings in the organization of our military intelligence. The war of 1904-1905 demonstrated the necessity of not only continuous reconnaissance during combat operations, but also of permanent surveillance within the territory of the probable opponent and other states, recruitment of agents, bribery of military and state officials, and counterintelligence, which is neglected, according to most intelligence officers. In addition, I offer the latest report from our agents on the case of Mr. Tesla.

According to our information, in the summer of 1914, when Serbia was at the center of events that led to the beginning of World War I, Mr. Tesla remained in America, taking part in soliciting funds for the Serbian army. Several times in the presence of the press, he expressed a very inadequate idea clearly related to his recent scientific developments. For instance: "The time will come when some scientific genius will invent a machine capable of destroying one or more armies in one action."

We propose to maximally activate our group's efforts to retrieve Mr. Tesla's technical documents before the German intelligence service does so."

Colonel V.V. Sedyakin

CHAPTER 8

70° 04' 36" N
170° 51' 12" E

*Chaunsky District, Chukotka, Russian Federation
March 31, 2001*

“This damned place! What in the world attracted you here, tell me? We could be sitting right now in a sauna! You won’t even get yourself cleaned properly! Always showers and showers! It’s not humanlike. People tried with their souls, heated it, cut an ice-hole. It’s winter, dammit!”

“In my opinion, it’s spring! And it’s very beautiful here! Look at how the wind walks, and such waves! Maybe we’ll shoot down something? Who roams around here now?”

“We can take a fox. But that’s unlikely with this weather – helluva lot of wind.”

The two men were walking slowly, in measuring steps, along the coast of the Chukchi Sea. One of them, an authoritative figure, listened attentively to what the other was explaining. The “boss” had an expensive-looking shotgun hanging over his shoulder. On the melting snow, rolling through the snow dunes, two vehicles slowly followed the men: a black Toyota Land Cruiser and a Russian-made all-terrain army vehicle, GAZ-34039. Three other men in dark jackets journeyed at a distance along the same course, scanning the desolate, forbidding surroundings.

The discussion turned to setting up a repeater station in this area to ensure continued telephone and internet connection for the few towns and villages. The nearest such station was in Pevek and had a service range of several hundred kilometers. This was clearly not enough for the needs of the villages, geological stations, settlements of reindeer herders and hunters, and for the increasing shipping traffic on the Northern Sea Route. Moscow was keenly interested in developing this area and openly hinted to the private sector that it would be nice to not use state funds, but “other” financial resources instead. As they say, there was little choice.

“Andrei Andreyevich, you have to understand that if we set the station here, people will be sent here as if to the pole for exile. Even animals haven’t walked these lands in years. It’s a dead place!” loudly voiced the elderly man in a fur cap pulled down over his head, and hustling and waving his short arms.

“Don’t worry, Nikolai Alekseyevich, everything will be fine.” It was evident that the tall young man with a red week-old beard, with a bare head and in dark glasses, and in a short, light and, apparently, very warm jacket, turned to his companion with an elaborate yet ironic politeness.

“If necessary, I’ll send a good work force here. Bachelors and experienced explorers. There have to be three people per shift. It’ll be warm under the roof, with constant connection... much better than toiling on a rig or on a rocker. We’ll build a helicopter pad, warehouses, and so on... stock up on vodka. Speaking of which, how about some, Nikolai Alekseyevich? Maybe you’ll sign up for a season or other?” Along with words, white vapor came from his mouth. He walked, wistfully looking at the bleak hills, the unfriendly Chukchi Sea, and thought: *What the fuck am I doing here? There wasn’t any need to choose the site myself, or to even fly out here. Everything could be done by experts. Look at me – a communications expert, idiot! Signalmillionaire! Wherever you want, that’s where you put these damn repeaters. Come to London!*

No, better you come to us to Kolyma... How I've had it with these social responsibilities, fat bitches...

The fresh breeze from the sea touched the young man's red hair. He was a naturally handsome persona: built like a mid-weight boxer, pale-skinned like the poet Byron, and with blue eyes set deep in the shadows of his brows. His name was Andrei Andreyevich Romanov. He was forty-one years old. He was worth three billion dollars and had the broadest of ties "at the top." These ties allowed him to engage in speculation, securities, state property, the "official" removal of competitors, and other matters, always bringing him a profit. A considerable profit.

This inexplicable pull to come and "enjoy" the beauty of the Arctic Circle came to fruition only a few weeks ago to this Russian nouveau riche, who rose from small business in the early nineties to a billionaire-dollar empire today. He was driving in Moscow to a Union of Industrialists meeting when he suddenly halted in a traffic jam on Tverskaya. No emergency or security vehicles and not even signal-flashing state limos could unglue the cars stuck like sprats in a can on both sides of the street. Out of nowhere, a dirty gypsy, some Tajik kid, ran up to the car and began to rub a sticky cloth on the tinted glass on the passenger side of the black Bentley. The boy's eyes were completely empty and seemed like huge eyeballs. He was furiously trying to push the cloth on the glass directly in the face of Romanov, as if to wipe his nose. Out flew the guards, trying to pull the boy away – however, he grabbed a door handle, so that even two brick-faces couldn't do anything. He even managed to free for a few moments, pulling out of his inner jacket pocket a stub of corn cob and rubbed it onto the window with force. Yellow peas scattered on the sides, and the spot of impact on the glass blurred like a sun in children's drawings. "*Ton guha,*" cried the boy heart-feltingly, "*Ton guha!*"

Finally, the security tore the boy off the car and kicked him onto the sidewalk, where onlookers were already enjoying the little spectacle. "*Ton guha! Ton guha...*" the little dark-skinned kid continued screaming, until one of the guards didn't feign a movement, supposedly trying to catch the offender of the peace. The kid disappeared down an alleyway, showing a long, pink tongue at the security.

Romanov smiled and asked the driver, anxiously glancing at the clock, "Kostya, what is this '*ton guha?*' Do you know, by chance?"

"Some damn black speak probably, Andrei Andreyevich. 'Give me money,' or something, I guess. I know that in Georgian, 'give me money' goes something like *puli mamitschkhara...* something like that, though I'm not sure... They're everywhere!"

Being from Yaroslavl, Kostya was deeply worried about the ethnic cleanliness of the capital's population. Meanwhile, Romanov's heart suddenly felt pricked, and he sighed with a slight groan, leaning back in his leather seat and closing his eyes. He became deathly depressed, like once upon a time following the tragic death of his mother in a car accident. Kostya turned and looked worriedly at his boss, who just waved his hand and said, "Never mind, let's go..." Indeed, the jam surprisingly cleared up, as if it didn't exist. Cars moved, picking up speed, snorting fumes at each other.

And now, in light of the occasion, and, of course, due to the availability of a good bottle of whiskey in the lonely room at the Intercontinental (Romanov didn't want to drag himself back to his empty, remote home right after a meeting "at the top"), instead of spending "quality time" with his family in a cottage purchased three years ago in a small Belgian ski village, he quickly gathered his crew for a flight the next day to Yakutsk, for an "emergency trip." He was suddenly so frightened that something very important was passing, something that will change his whole

life, that he jumped out of bed in the middle of the night, awakened by a telephone call from his secretary and forced him to immediately take up this matter.

Romanov's manic fear of becoming someone's victim – of friends, businessmen, raiders, or omnipresent secret services – forced him to engage more in securities, shares, and resale of land, followed by the withdrawal of capital to quiet western markets, and less in the supply of hydrocarbons and metals. Having done some experiments with securities, he was convinced that they were a profitable activity. He continued to bribe public officials, through whom he received ownership of national resources and treasures. Reselling securities became his main passion.

However, at times Romanov was still attacked by unmanageable thoughts he was unable to escape from and failed to make logic of. At such moments he developed a tick. All the signs of neurosis were present. But instead of consulting doctors, he visited certain “mind expanders.” At such nagging moments, Romanov passionately dreamt that the Lord – yes, God himself – instructed him to some important task, the Mission, to receive information and so that he, Romanov, must humbly carry it from place to place. Yes, yes! He must become a messenger of God: the Chosen One. He wanted to rid himself of all this “easy money” that flooded his mind and life – money that prevented him from accepting and delivering the... let's call it the “stigmata.” Yes, carry it from God to... someone else, just as high...

Romanov was brought down to earth from his reflections by the cheerful voice of Nikolai Alekseyevich, who was marching through snow in long strides and moving his arms like a professional skier.

“Vodka will lure any fool to the station, Andrei Andreyevich,” joked the old man. He was a regional manager – a solid, serious man with graying temples and a huge black mustache that resembled a shoe brush. He was an adherent of a simple, soldier's humor and always knew how to support a conversation.

“Vodka-thirsty fools are exactly who we don't need here. Either we place one station here for all three sectors, or we place three other ones – one for each sector to the south. These three other ones will cost me dimes, if not cents. Putting up IT geeks and hackers here... what do they care where they fuck their virtual chicks, here or in Moscow? In the meantime, they'll be busy enough looking after the system, so they won't be biting their elbows from boredom.”

“That's something! See, I'm an old man in my seventh decade, but I can't tear away my granddaughter from that TV set, or what's it called... a monitor!” Nikolai took a deep breath and continued, “All she does is trend over the Internet with her giggling girlfriends. And they live... two houses away from each other! In our town, there are just those two houses,” Nikolai laughed dryly, not letting the cigarette leave his mouth. “In the old days we ran to our friends without knocking on their door, but today's youth doesn't even leave their homes. Well, at least no one has to worry where they're disappearing to!”

“Here, here. And the stations we'll arrange in the right places, and I'll be able to locate you anywhere, brother, even from London. You won't give me any excuses, that there's no connection...”

His boots crunching on razor-sharp ice-hummocks reaching towards the sun, Romanov sharply leaned away from a gust of wind and immediately ran into Nikolai, almost tumbling him. Nikolai stood rock-still, eyes bulging, the cigarette hanging on his lower lip, trying to singe his “walrus” mustache.

“Andrei Andreyevich, look, what is this mess, mother of God?”

The half-melted snow around the coastal black shapeless boulder exposed what at first sight looked like a pile of rags and paper. All of this miraculously hung on some carcass. A white

carcass, treading through half-decayed tissue, upon closer inspection turned out to be the ribs of a decayed corpse, of human remains.

And here we've come... thought Romanov with an air of indifference. The anguish and chest pain that was in him like a thorn for a week already, from the moment he arrived to these polar lands, somehow all at once left him. He said aloud: "Well, Nikolai Andreyevich, this is where we'll put the station... we'll call it 'At the Dead Mountaineer.'"

CHAPTER 9

34° 38' 14" S
58° 21' 12" W

*Buenos Aires, Argentina
October 14, 1972*

Dinner went by strangely. The mother seemed dispirited or upset. But that did not stop her, as always, from sitting at the head of the table and reading the traditional prayer that Diego knew by heart since the age of five. Dalma received this prayer in a letter from her cousin in the United States, on Long Island, with a note that it is "the most blessed prayer that your family can ever receive." Three weeks later, the cousin died in a car accident. Before every meal, Dalma recited the prayer as a testament before each meal.

I do solemnly swear that I will always respect the property of others and be content with their lot, destined in my life by the grace of God. I will always be thankful to my masters, will never complain either of my posited pay or of extra labour, but I will always question myself: "What else can I do for my masters, for my people and for God?" We were born on this earth not for happiness, but for trial and ordeal. And this ordeal – the burden of Fire – was given to us to cleanse our souls. And if I want to carry this Fire from one place to another, then I must always be an unselfish, sober, and truthful person. I must always be of pure soul, body, deeds and thoughts... Be full of respect for those whom the Creator, in his ineffable wisdom, has put over me. If I endure this trial, then death will be followed by eternal life and heavenly bliss. If, however, I will not endure, I will forever burn in the flames of hell, the Devil will triumph, and Christ will grieve of me.

Little Diego sat there, eyes fixated on the eggs. The father, leaning his head to one side, was looking admiringly at Diego's mother. Then, while Diego was working on his thrice-heated omelet with pieces of coarsely chopped red bell pepper, the father and mother quietly discussed local news. Behind the wall, the younger sister, Mary, dropped off her blanket in response to the heat.

"People in the city are losing their minds. They say there's a maniac who kills children at night. Here, listen," Dalma smoothed the pages of the local newspaper, the *Buenos Aires Review*, on the table, "...*police chief Don Rodriguez warns the local population of La Boca district, especially parents of young children. 'Do not allow children out in the evening. Or look after them yourselves...'*"

"Buenos Aires is slowly turning into Mexico City," the father nodded.

"This maniac," continued the mother, sighing and pushing the paper aside, "beats the poor things to death just like that, and then cuts off their ears and sends them to the police station... by mail, in a parcel. It's as if he's saying: 'catch me, police! Here I am!'"

"Yes, I heard parents from some schools in the lower city even decided to organize night patrols on the streets. But how can you keep watch of everybody?" said the father, sipping *Mendoza*, with his wicker chair creaking.

"Son, you shouldn't run around so late in the evening, eh? This may be happening not in our hood, but in La Boca, but better to be safe than sorry," the mother stroked Diego's tousled, curly hair.

“That’s right, Diego. Until the police track down the bastard, come home before dark! Consider that an order!” grimly asserted his father.

“Don’t worry so much, ma-papa,” the boy hurriedly blurted out, pushing aside his plate, and planting a kiss on his mother’s cheek. Already fleeing to his room, he added, “It’s not like I go out alone in the evenings, I’m always with friends...”

Diego undressed, turned off the old desk lamp and climbed into bed. Outside, cicadas itched in a monotone voice, the neighbour’s window slammed shut, and uncle Mariña’s car passed by, rattling on potholes. An empty bucket suspended from the body characteristically tapped on each bump in the road. Cats cried out occasionally. The huge city was slowly preparing for sleep. For a while, Diego lay motionless. Behind one wall – his parents were talking quietly, behind another – his younger sister Mary was turning and muttering something in her sleep. On the table among the books, the black and white sides of the gift Diego received from his father gleamed in the moonlight. Diego crawled out from under the blanket and while making a step in the dark, suddenly stumbled and nearly hit his head on the table. Stooping, he picked up his little black ball. Diego stood still in the middle of the room; his head leaned to his shoulder. At this moment, tears began to flow down his cheeks. *I’ll never leave you, Kuluangwa! Never!* He swung and fell on his bed, hugged the old ball tightly and with it turned towards the wall, pulling his knees to his chest.

Pressing the ball in his palms made him feel light, almost electric, bites. He was already used to them. They appeared every night. Completely painless at first, they gradually became more and more insistent. However, Diego was not afraid of them. On the contrary, he waited for these sensations with unconcealed trepidation and deep joy. At this point, a hard, warm lump always appeared in his throat, making him want to cry – to weep bitterly. That’s what the boy often did, firmly wrapped in his blanket. He tore off the blackened patch off the palm of his left hand. Curled in pain that he suffered every night, he whispered, “Now, now, wait...”

Clenching his teeth, Diego pressed his right thumb on the wound. He was so twisted in pain that he grabbed the edge of the pillow with his teeth, holding back a moan. A large drop of blood emerged from the cut and spread out over the palm of his hand. Carefully, so as not to stain the linens, he put his hand to the ball. The small hand went into the black surface, like into melted wax, and the soothingly warm ball firmly accepted it into its fold. It will hold Diego’s palm until morning, rocking, caressing and massaging it until the bleeding will stop. Now the boy was asleep. A happy smile roamed on his lips.

CHAPTER 10

*To: Head of Intelligence Directorate
General Staff of the Red Army
General I.I. Ilichev*

*Head of Second Chief Directorate, C/A №174
Lieutenant K.M. Litvinov
Anglo-American Residence*

January 20, 1943

OPERATIONAL REPORT

Comrade General,

On the substance of the operation carried out to extract the secret dossier of Mr. Tesla, I inform you of the following:

FROM THE RECORD OF INTERROGATION

As per investigatory case no. 877, Lt. Alexei Trofimovich Ivasenko (agent “Jack”) and Lt. Pavel Magomedovich Goyev (agent “Hispanic”) have been questioned.

Lt. Ivasenko and Lt. Goyev conducted a swift operation in New York with the objective of extracting Mr. Tesla’s document archive, which is in development. The operation involved a multiple-turn game, which did not lead to the intended outcome. We became aware that Abwehr agents stationed in the U.S. (Admiral Wilhelm Canaris personally oversees the operation) are actively interested in the achievements of Mr. Tesla. We have noted a high degree of activity of known German agents (“Ron”, “Stein”, and “Arab”) seeking to take possession of Mr. Tesla’s designs in the near future (in one-two weeks’ time), as part of the “Vergeltungswaffe” program (“Weapons of Vengeance”).

Given these developments, we decided to accelerate our efforts to capture, copy, and destroy the materials before Abwehr agents manage to do so. I present the main points of the explanatory memorandum on the merits of Lt. Ivasenko as the group leader.

*To: Head of Second Chief Directorate, C/A №174
Lieutenant K.M. Litvinov*

Taking into account that the object of our interest, Mr. Tesla, has lived a very secluded lifestyle in recent years, being completely devoid of all public and even friendly contacts, we have made several attempts to infiltrate Mr. Tesla’s surroundings as service personnel of the New Yorker Hotel. Mr. Tesla has spent the recent years in solitude in this hotel. However, we established that Mr. Tesla communicated only with the hotel staff he knew well. In their absence, his breakfast, lunch and dinner were delivered to his room personally by the hotel manager.

As stokers and chimney cleaners, we successfully managed to enter room no. 673 of the New Yorker Hotel, where Mr. Tesla lived, on January 7 at 6:47 a.m. In the evening of January 6,

we were able to block the chimney of room no. 673 from the roof, and through Mr. Colin, the concierge whom we bribed, we were invited as the repair team “J. Jameson & Co.” to examine and fix the chimney.

We decided in the first place to copy the archive and only then, being sure that we possess all necessary documentation, to try to persuade Mr. Tesla to cooperate. We established the location of the safe beforehand thanks to the concierge. The complexity of the lock did not present any problems.

We repeatedly asked Mr. Tesla to temporarily leave the premises, for half-an-hour at most, for the length of the “repairs” (so we could open the safe and copy the documents in his absence). Mr. Tesla was wearing a brand new, expensive black suit, despite the early morning hours. He also wore a tie, as if going to a business meeting. However, Mr. Tesla refused to leave the room, seemingly suspecting something. He even wanted to call the hotel staff to rid of us.

In lieu of the situation, we used force to neutralize him for a while. Mr. Tesla showed remarkable resistance for his age. At one point during the ensuing battle, realizing the hopelessness of the situation, Mr. Tesla consumed an unknown chemical drug, a small piece of material that he pulled off from a porous black cube. He always held this object, a black dice, in his hands. (Attached is a 2x2x2 mm sample taken from the original for chemical analysis – it is sent to P.A. Sudoplatov at the NKVD Laboratory, 5th Section of the 9th Department of the Chief Directorate of State Security).

Mr. Tesla’s death was instantaneous. We moved the body to the sofa in the living room and folded his hands on his chest to give the impression of self-poisoning, or suicide by sleeping pills. All evidence of struggle, as well as traces of cracking the safe, fingerprints and so on, were thoroughly destroyed.

We successfully opened the safe and photocopied the documents. By the instructions of the Second Chief Directorate, all technical documentation containing the data for the production of “super energy” was destroyed (burned in the fireplace). Only original documents of a philosophical and aesthetic character, which do not represent any intelligence value, were left in the safe. Copies of the documents are attached.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

At the moment we left the room, we noted that Mr. Tesla’s body acquired some very strange physical properties. It became unusually heavy, as if the corpse turned into a metallic, steel statue. Also, at a distance of 1-2 cm, Mr. Tesla’s entire body was covered by a thin, bright-green translucent layer, which disappeared immediately upon touching it.

NKGB First Lieutenant A.T. Ivasenko

*The suicide version of Mr. Tesla’s death is adopted as the main and official one. The photocopied documents have been interpreted at our 6th Special Department of the Soviet Embassy in Washington. The photocopies are attached. The translation is attached. As evidence of the adoption of the main version of Mr. Tesla’s death without aggravating circumstances, the translation of an article from *The New York Times* on January 13, 1943 is attached.*

The New York Times
January 13, 1943

EDITORIAL: The death of Tesla

On January 7, 1943 the great and controversial scientist Tesla passed away at the age of 86 in New York. What do we know about him? We know a lot. And we know nothing.

Tesla believed that the universe is a living system, and that all human beings in it are machines that behave according to the laws of space. He believed that the human brain does not have imaginative memory in the sense as commonly thought, but that memory is only the reaction of nerves in the repetitive external stimulus that is invariantly generated by periodic physical effects. More importantly, Tesla did not consider his thousand-plus fundamental, scientific inventions as a work of merit. He saw himself as no more than a conductor of science between the world of ideas and the world of human practice.

Tesla's last experiments were financed by well-known banker Morgan, but he never brought them to the end. Tesla teased us with cryptic phrases that he dropped on occasion and that were readily adopted by newspapers (including ours) as unequivocal proof of his connection with another world. Tesla lived during a mania for invention. Sometimes it seems like he barely needed to stress his thoughts to conceive a brilliant idea that would bestow benefit to all humanity. However, many potential investors imagine the activity of scientists in the same way. They are willing to pay for the implementation of ready inventions, but usually do not intend to finance long-term studies. During a mysterious meeting at the Grand Hotel in 1990, Tesla convinced billionaire Morgan to sponsor the construction of his laboratory on Long Island.

Tesla convinced Morgan that he knew how to transmit huge amounts of energy for a considerable distance without wires. Did Tesla really know or only think he knew? To date, no one has managed to achieve this feat. Morgan decided that Tesla's objective was worthy of his investment and that the greatest invention of the century would be in his hands. With Morgan's funding, Tesla built the Wardencliff tower, which generated strong, bright green electric discharges. The lightning that emitted from the tower scared local townfolk to death. After Tesla failed to achieve his stated objective, Morgan stopped further financing and publicly denounced Tesla as a "magician."

However, our newspaper has information that the scientist and the financier continued to meet, albeit in secret. Both parties can be blamed for their public fallout and end of cooperation. Morgan did not understand that science does not always produce immediate profit. Tesla placed too much trust in his own brilliant intuition. The public split between the two may have been only an appearance, a cover for a much deeper relationship.

Tesla did not lack ideas and theories, but he was inclined to attribute all results of his experiments to them, regardless of success. For instance, he believed that his experiments with electricity caused storms in the Indian Ocean, for which there could not be any evidence. The scientist's boundless faith in his own ideas misled him more than once. He claimed to have invented "death rays" that could destroy a warship at a distance of 200 miles. However, the radiator he built could not cause serious harm even to laboratory animals. We became aware that Tesla, despite his advanced age, actively cooperated with the military-industrial complex. Nevertheless, he maintained the image of a misunderstood genius, being able to attract the general public's attention no worse than a bearded woman in a circus.

Doctors concluded that Tesla died of acute heart failure – a heart attack. Tesla's death itself is seen an expression of his personal triumph: it is rather like a conscious reincarnation to different planes of existence rather than a death of an ordinary man, embarrassed and frightened in the face of self-liberation. Two days before his death, Tesla had stopped working and locked himself in a room of the New Yorker Hotel, asking not to be disturbed. The day before his death, the hotel room's fireplace stopped working. The chimney was repaired by a crew of two immigrants. They were apparently the last people to see Tesla alive. Our newspaper tried to find these people, but to no avail. According to our information, the police are not looking for these people and the case of Tesla's death was dismissed for lack of evidence of any violent or unnatural causes of death.

Tesla did not order his usual continental breakfast, lunch and dinner, which caused confusion among hotel staff. When the director of the hotel and a chambermaid finally entered Tesla's room, they found his body lifeless on the couch, lying on his back with arms folded and elegantly dressed in a suit and tie, as if ready for a farewell. Tesla's hands held a dense, black cube no bigger than an inch. Was the scientist showing that he was exiting this world pure, with Holy Communion?

Tesla's electromagnetic theory was a prime example of an attempt to unite the material and the spiritual world orders. Tesla was so busy that he did not leave us with a coherent theory. Perhaps he could have left us a new religion, but he did not want to because he knew that the God of Science requires conscious followers. Tesla also destroyed almost all of his records that were kept in a secret safe in his hotel room. That was evidenced by the nearly empty metal box and the stack of flat ash from burnt manuscripts in the fireplace.

Christian and Buddhist funeral services were supposed to be held for Tesla, but on January 12, his body was removed from the morgue in Brooklyn by military intelligence services for a post-mortem in New Arch. On the next day it was announced that Tesla's body was burned according to Buddhist tradition. The funeral took place in the presence of only the closest associates of the deceased.

The New York Times expresses its deepest condolences to the family and friends of the departed Mr. Tesla.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Agent A.T. Ivasenko, codename "Jack", under the guise of a funeral bureau servant gained the trust of a crematorium employee, S. Hottman. The latter told him that during the farewell ceremony with the body of the late Mr. Tesla, the coffin was not opened. The coffin's weight turned out to be much lighter than when it was picked up the secret service. There is speculation that Mr. Tesla was not cremated and buried, but that his body is at a military laboratory in Newark, New Jersey.

GRU Lt.-Col. K.M. Litvinov

MEDICAL EXAMINATION ANALYSIS

Careful analysis of the sample of material delivered to a laboratory has showed that it is nothing other than organic rubber, supposedly of a very old origin. No natural or synthetic poisons were found in the analyzed sample.

*NKVD Laboratory (5th Section of the 9th Department of the Chief Directorate of State Security
Col. PA Sudoplatov*

*RESOLUTION
(Top left corner, in blue ink)*

*Despite the death of Tesla, continue active search for “trigger”
and all documents associated with it. Report in person.
Ilichev*

CHAPTER 11

20° 40' 14" N

88° 34' 12" W

*Chichen-Itza, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico
December 1520*

With the onset of dusk, as soon as the serpent Chaak descended with its gray shadow down the steps of Kukulcan, Kuluangwa's group sang a traditional hymn of victory, the echo of which reflected off the Temple of Warriors and drowned in the Southern Temple, right at the stadium's entrance. A special ceremony was underway, forbidden to ordinary tribesmen and attended only by keepers of the secret. The chiefs and priests of the tribe, the long-time performers of these duties at Chichen-Itza, came into contact with the secret at every full moon. The chosen team for the ball game was selected just a few days before the momentous event, right before the match. This time, however, the entire team was invited by the High Priest much earlier than usual. The ceremony involved a special procedure and act, and was called Chok-Chaya, that is – the spilling of tears.

As the God of Rain, the serpent Chaak, descended from the peak onto the hot ground, the priest Vak Balama raised his dry hands towards that peak and hoarsely called all ten team members to follow him up the steep steps to the main temple of Kukulcan. A foot could scarcely fit on each of the hundreds of narrow steps, placed at an angle of almost forty-five degrees, reaching the temple, which was not visible from the base of the pyramid.

The interior of the temple was cavernous. There was nothing inside the hall other than a large stone table. The walls from floor to ceiling were decorated with drawings and writings written in small ligature. The corners of the secret hall had inconspicuous, small height gaps from which priests emerged during ceremonies.

The red beams of the last sunlight of the day penetrated through the narrow vertical slits in the wall. The whole town at the bottom, with its temples, residences and stadium, already delved into a dark haze that did not bring the expected night-time cool. The light from the slits fell in six beams onto the middle of the room.

In the middle of the temple, whose dimensions were so great that it could hold several dozen people at the same time, stood a wide stone table, twenty by twenty cubits. It was a platform of four low, well-polished stone slabs no higher than knee-level. If desired, one could move the table into a corner, or even out of the temple. But today it was meant to be at the centre of the Chok-Chaya rite – the spilling of tears. The mirror-like polished surface of the table was dotted with numerous engraved and colored drawings of the life of the gods. The images were not violated by the troughs coming from the center – three troughs per each side, twelve in total. Running down a slope, they stopped at the darkening hole in the middle of the table. If viewed from above, the picture of the troughs resembled four lotus flowers growing from one point in the middle of the table. But the beauty of this had quite a utilitarian function. The table was assembled in the center of the temple only for the most important rituals – the rituals of blood sacrifices.

In the middle, between the four polished stone blocks just below the hole, a wide stone vase was placed, upon which a black rubber sphere rested, like an overgrown coconut. Like the

ball, the ancient vase was of a dark brown color. The limestone permeated a powerful natural colorant.

The priest, Vak Balama, made a wide circular gesture, commanding the audience to take their seats around the table. His head was hidden by a mask, painted with bright red and yellow horizontal bars. His black oiled belly was reflected in the rays of the torch, revealing a cross of four deep, white scars. Four other scars – long, narrow, like cat scratches – ripped up each shoulder, starting just above the collarbone and ending above the nipples.

Ten adult men in full war paint slowly approached the table and equally slowly knelt down on both sides. There were five soldiers on each side of the table. Balama's hand motioned for Tolana to take a seat opposite him, which she did immediately, sinking to her knees and bowing her head. Then Vak Balama walked off into one of the room's dark corners, where flashes of flames only occasionally revealed strange engravings on limestone blocks, and melted into the darkness.

In a few moments, the priest re-emerged, with his outstretched arms carrying something resembling a large palm leaf with a long stem, with its edges hanging down and touching the ground with every step. The leaf's stalks bent down from time to time, but not in sync with the slow gait of the priest. When Balama returned into light at the table, it became evident that he was holding a blue sea ray. Raising the animal high above his head, Vak Balama shouted: "*Hei olay! Leth soro ta kama vok!* Are you ready? Do not be afraid, be strong!" Then he swung and threw the ray on the table. The animal fell flat, issuing a squish sound, and scattering lumps of transparent mucus. Its tail bone, similar to a sharp spear, weakly rapped on the table twice and then calmed down and froze. And only a small tremor, occasionally running through the body of the marine creature, reminded that the ray was still alive. However, the warriors in attendance did not pay any attention to this creature. All ten men and Tolana, heads bent low and hands humbly folded on the table, were expecting commands from Vak Balama.

"*Kon na luva-na!*" The priest's command rang through the hall and all men obeyed without hesitation. They dropped their clothes, remaining only in masks, and returned to their previous poses in complete nudity. Then, as if by a silent command, the warriors launched a monotonous guttural sound: *hmm-m-m-m-m-m, hmm-m-m-m-m-m*.

Tolana also made a move to shake off her cloak embroidered in coloured threads, but Balama's gesture made her stop and she immediately returned to the table where she remained in the same humble posture, head bowed down and hands clasped in front of her. Her voice joined the chorus of the warriors. The sound echoed loudly between the walls and continued in eternal echoes.

For there to be a woman in the temple, the holy of holiest of the tribe, on top of the pyramid Kukulcan, was unusual. This was actually the first time in the history of the tribe. At least Kuluangwa, sitting on his knees at the table, could not recall a single previous time when the Chok-Chaya ritual was attended by a woman. Not once, neither his father nor grandfather, have ever told him anything like this. Tolana did not enter properly, but crept into the temple on all fours, and only after the priest's permission could she stand up in full growth.

Vak Balama again stepped into the shadows, arms folded on his chest, and for a while silently and sullenly watched the kneeling naked warriors. Tolana occasionally frowned nervously, trying to keep your back straight and not pressing her stomach against the cold surface of the table. The priest could see that in a few more weeks the body of this woman will bring another fruit to the tribe. But it was this that bothered Balama the most. In his plans, women were designed for an entirely different purpose. They were among the most important

instruments in the sacrifice-bringing of the tribe, when it was required to propitiate the angry gods. *But not here, not now – at top of the pyramid. Not in the temple, and not with a new unit of ball players. Later, in a few days... it will be a special occasion.*

Usually, the chosen victims were virgins, and Tolana of course no longer fit in this category. Virgins were usually sacrificed as follows: three-to-six girls were washed in hot stone baths, their bodies were rubbed in oils of special plants, and then the priest would exercise control over the innocent girls in front of the raging mob. After that, the priest's assistants would dress the poor girls in beautiful clothes and gold jewelry. All of the girls received a ritual drink, and soon – in just a few minutes – the girls plunged into their first and last trance.

The secret of this drink had long been passed down through generations of priests by inheritance, and was certainly known only to the leader and the high priest of the tribe. The secret of the potion lay in its duality. Two drinks were mixed not to complement each other, but to simultaneously deny each other in the human body. Alcoholic tincture from selected cactuses was mixed in undisclosed proportions with a squeeze of water lilies. The cactus extracts increases the drinker's mood, the tone of the whole body, and blood pressure. The extract of lilies caused severe hallucinations and dramatically lowered blood pressure. Balama always prepared the drinks himself, not allowing even his closest aides to witness the process.

As a rule, the hearts of young victims could not withstand the confrontation present in the drinks and the girls died, plunging into vision, apathy and afterlife. In their final paths, the girls' bodies, richly dressed, decorated, and painted with colourful tattoos and intricate patterns, were carried by male warriors. The warriors, leading the procession and being followed by the entire tribe, threw the dead girls down into the Cenote – the lakes of sacrifice, hidden in deep sinkholes.

One of the Cenotes was at Chichen-Itza, to the north of Tzompantli - the plateau of Eagles and Jaguars. Another Cenote was at Chtuloq, right in the heart of the city, near the main well. These two Cenotes have failed to produce fresh water for a long time, and filled once a year by torrential mid-spring rainfall, although to less than half their height. Then the water began to blossom and became suitable only for irrigation of cornfields, which began just behind the Northern temple and the field for ball games.

Now, the tribe's cornfield was dead. Studded with dry stem shoots that barely rose above knee-level and burned under the hot sun, the cornfield terrified the whole tribe.

Vak Balama's last offering was made four full moons ago. The gods wanted blood only at full moon. Today was a full moon and the gods demanded new blood. This was also indicated by the three stars of the Three Holy Warriors, which lined up with another star, the brightest and most beautiful star of the Queen of Water. And the Sun of the God Chaak stopped and froze under this sign for several hours without movement, before lowering the world into the realm of darkness and coming back the next morning. This only happened once a year, on December 21. This would be in 20 days from now. However, the strange occurrence that happened at the Sacred Cenote of Chichen-Itza six full moons ago identified the sacrificial rites in a whole new way.

The Cenotes used to be full with cold spring water, at a depth of several dozen metres. They had several cunning outflows through a variety of underground caves in the salty Caribbean Sea. Today, the Cenotes were shallow and dry. Besides the fact that they took in the sacrificial victims, whose bodies were eventually carried by the water through the underground rivers flowing into the sea, the sinkholes were the only sources of fresh drinking water.

The bodies of the six latest sacrifices were not carried anywhere by the water. They remained lying in small ponds, like beautiful gilded puppets. Buckets were dropped into the

wells on long ropes woven from the bark of trees, but the water from these sources was not drinkable anymore. Twisting from the smell, one of the residents took a few timid sips, immediately threw up, and the next day he became one of the first dead to be carried by citizens to outside the city and buried in stones. The city was entirely without water. There was no rain for six full moons – the same length of time that no sacrifices had been made to the gods by those that wanted through death to come closer to them and enter the Temple of Happiness.

Now, when the whole city was quietly complaining of having to take the dead bodies of friends and relatives outside the city walls, the priest decided that the time has come and that there will be no more waiting.

CHAPTER 12

21° 10' 30" N

86° 53' 45" W

Mexico, Yucatan Peninsula

December 14, 1971

The trip to Mexico, which Dalma mentioned in a conversation with her husband, happened just over a year ago, before Christmas. Dalma had strongly insisted that the whole family was to be back home in Buenos Aires for the holy feast. “No exceptions! Otherwise, the father’s things will be in the suitcase at the door!”

At the time, the senior Diego worked for a small construction company that temporarily employed many seasonal workers who were often quite illiterate and unskilled. They were sent to prepare construction sites, removing trees and debris, building fences, cleaning the beaches, and guarding the area. Diego had worked for the company for a full 12 years, had good skills in construction, laying brick walls, decorating interiors, and even reading blueprints. And most importantly – he knew English, which was necessary for communicating at construction sites abroad. The chief executive of the firm by now already trusted Diego to manage the construction brigades of a few more or less professional builders and a couple of dozen general labourers. His salary increased and Dalma was grilling the head of the family much less for his meager income.

In May 1971, the company was chosen by the American construction giant, Rock and Still Corporation, to lay the groundwork from a chain of resorts in Cancun – a fast-developing coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. The contract turned out to be beneficial to both parties. The Americans got relatively inexpensive and more or less skilled labor, without having to spend on training local workers. Diego, for the first time, received an international agreement – in particular, such a profitable one by Argentine standards. His duties included, among other things, the delivery of the construction crew to Cancun and placing them in the territory. There they were to prepare the site for construction of Hotel Caracol, which was to be part of the American-controlled Stanbridge chain. Thus, an Argentine crew was headed to Mexico crammed inside five rusty school buses, of bright-yellow colour and Californian origin in a former life. The buses were accompanied by a 1964 Volkswagen caravan painted with bright exotic flowers, leaves, marijuana, and fingers in a “V” gesture. Diego bought this vehicle for three hundred dollars (and two bottles of good house wine from Aunt Amia) from a young American couple that decided to remain permanently in such a glorious corner of the world, Argentina.

The two weeks in Mexico flew by swiftly. Diego Gonzalez, Sr. only returned to his sleeping trailer late at night, spending all the days at the construction site. So all these days, Diego, Jr. was completely on his own. Running around on miles of white beaches, he discovered more and more secrets. His friends from school could only envy how much Diego was able to discover in the past week. Sometimes, while wandering in the thickets of the dry jungle, he found a strange building with strange statues carved from white limestone. The figures were scary, with bulging eyes and bared fangs. Their gaze was constantly fixed on Diego, no matter where he went. The boy was taken by panic. That is why Diego failed to get close to any of these sculptures.

One day, while playing in the woods, Diego got lost. There was just a dirt road here leading to the construction site. There was just the sound of the sea, which Diego would have

readily followed. But it all disappeared. Diego was frightened, because all the landmarks that his father had pointed out in case he'd get lost were no longer there. He let out a few shouts from between the palms of his hands, but he heard back only the singing of the birds and the rustle of dry leaves.

Suddenly, a man of small height emerged into the clearing where Diego stood. The man raised his eyes at the sky. He had a crooked walk and was dressed in a ridiculous loin skirt, coarse, but bright. This black-tanned man with a big, lumping head asked Diego something in a guttural and completely incomprehensible language. Seeing that the boy did not understand, the old man smiled broadly and made a hand gesture inviting Diego to follow him. What could Diego do? The sun was setting and he could not find his way back without assistance in any case. And, of course, spending such a long day under the sun, the last few hours of which the boy was without food and water, was taking its toll on Diego's body. Not to mention, the stranger did not look evil at all.

The small village to which the stranger brought the young traveller had already plunged into darkness and sleep. All that Diego heard were hens clucking, babies crying, and the crackling embers of a smoldering campfire. The stranger led Diego into a small hut and gave him a drink of fresh water, although warm and stale, and offered a couple of tortillas from a small table. Then, Diego's saviour fished out a pile of hard, striped blankets, spread them out on the floor of the hut, and folded one of the blankets into a pillow. Diego fell on all of this grace and quickly fell asleep.

The saviour waited until Diego's breathing levelled off and then covered the boy with a light blanket, quietly closed the rudimentary door, and exited to the clearing in the centre of the village. Beside a smoldering campfire in a clearing sat a motionless figure of a dried-up old man, who was silently staring either at the embers, or at a myriad of stars on the black and blue horizon. He had the jaw of a power-seeker and the forehead of a philosopher. This forehead was cut up by numerous wrinkles and one deep, vertical scar that must have stopped healing a long time ago. He sat on the ground, legs crossed and covered by a round, dark object the size of a coconut. Diego's saviour approached the old man, leaned over, and whispered something in his ear. The old man subtly nodded and again was left alone without even turning his head towards the tribesman.

CHAPTER 13

45° 27' 57" N

9° 11' 21" E

Milan, Italy

May 14, 1991

Rodion Karlovich Teichrib had a long way to travel. Multi-storey buildings of the Renaissance and Classicism gave way to brick and mortar buildings of the Milanese suburbia, complete with graffiti, broken and dried up paint, and sometimes empty windows. But Rodion Karlovich did not pay much attention to the surroundings that were flying by in the last rays of the sun. The pain in his temples was becoming simply unbearable. The bus slowed down sharply, pulling up behind it dust from a nearby construction site, and stopped at a crumpled metal frame that had once been a bus stop.

With a flick of his sun-burnt hand, the little man commanded Rodion Karlovich to exit. The academic silently, and without question, obeyed. Stepping onto the dusty pavement of Via Privata Ofanto, he looked around in search of a pharmacy or a sign with a green cross. His head continued to crack. It was either the heat or the tedious morning lecture on the contemporary and historical place of the Soviet Union in the global political system, featuring a bunch of useless questions from the audience about the possible construction of a “new democracy” in the USSR.

Meanwhile, the Italian, quickly shuffling his slightly bowed legs and constantly looking around and strangely waving his hand at the hip, called for Teichrib to follow him down the street of privateers. Obedient to some strange draw, Rodion Karlovich silently trudged after the old man. He did not have far to go. The old Italian led him to a desolate, but quite noisy, place - right at the exit of Tangenziale Est. He could hear how nervous drivers of cars and trucks were honking on the highway above him. But here, at the bottom, neither dust nor noise could prevent vines from growing an intricate green web on the white wicker porch. Tomato bushes on thin smooth stakes stood on the perimeters of properties, separating neighbours with their low hedges. It smelled of sweet wine and fresh bread. This was not Milan – it was Lazio.

The old man took Rodion Karlovich to a house and with a gentle hand gesture invited him inside. Noticing the faded “Vecchie-Nuove” sign and a lot of old utensils and unknown junk, Rodion Karlovich concluded that he was in an antique-pawn shop. Everything that happened afterwards played out like a strange little comedy, complete with black humour. The professor was standing in the middle of a small room cluttered with trash, and surveyed all this with increasing interest, despite his severe migraine. The old Italian disappeared behind a partition. But he quickly returned, in one hand holding a glass of water with a large bubbled tablet fizzing inside, and in the other hand he was clutching a large piece of boiled corn like a golden sword. And under his arm, he was holding a small black object, more like a tree fungus or a good-sized turnip.

The old man pushed the glass to Teichrib, who took it without delay. Then, the Italian thumped his finger on Teichrib’s temple and said, “*Si prega di bere, da un mal di testa.*” Rodion Karlovich’s modest knowledge of Italian prompted him to understand his companion’s words as “Drink please, it’s for a headache.” Moscow State University History Professor Rodion Karlovich Teichrib immediately drank the bubbling liquid with an aftertaste of aspirin, closed his eyes for a moment, and then nearly fell, receiving a severe blow to the head.

Recoiling and dropping the glass that shattered on the stone slabs, Rodion opened his eyes and saw how lumps of succulent masses were flying across the little room – yellow corn peas. This mess also crawled down from his forehead and hair. Before he knew it, the old man promptly turned Teichrib over his shoulders, kicked open the door, and pushed him out almost right under the wheels of a bus, which barely had time to slow down. A piece of corn cob flew after Rodion Karlovich. Surprisingly, this scene was not followed by any swearing or long explanations in rich Italian gestures and hoarse cries like “*idiotto!*” The bus driver opened the door to the still-empty bus. Giuseppe “Blue Nose” went out after Rodion Karlovich and placed a black object into the professor’s hands. With an apologetic tone to his voice, he said, “*Ton guha, Rodion! Grazie.*” He turned the professor around by his shoulders once again and gently pushed him into the bus.

Rodion Karlovich flopped on the first seat and sat there for about five minutes, looking blankly out the window. Then, he thoughtfully ran his hand through his hair, still wet from corn cob, and felt a light, bruised pain over his left eyebrow. A small streak of blood remained on this fingers. *So that’s how what a corn fight for freedom and independence feels like*, he chuckled to himself. A black, rubber ball was on his knees, pushing hard on the hip. Rodion Karlovich put his bloodied hand on the object and in instant the pain that was festering him for several hours vanished. Just gone, it let him go. The professor spread out on the plastic seat with a content smile.

The driver’s cry brought Rodion Karlovich back from emptiness. The bus was at the same bus stop on Piazza Lima, and even on the same side of Via Pleni. When Rodion walked past the driver, he stopped him. Politely but firmly, the driver tapped on a scratched metal box with a cracked glass window.

“*Dieci lire, signore, per favore,*” he rasped.

“Si, signore,” responded Teichrib in the same tone and threw in a well-worn coin of ten lire, with ears on one side and a plow on the other side. A minute later, he again sat on a bench at the bus stop, as if asleep for a few minutes. Instead of a headache on his hands, he now had a warm, black rubber ball.