

DAMN THE SOURCE

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OFF

"a decalogue for the 21st century"

Marek Kazmierski / winner of the penguin decibel prize

OFF

Ten stories, set on a single day. A dozen Poles, scattered across Britain. Labourers, aristocrats, dealers. Each life somehow changed by a blade. A surgeon's scalpel. An artist's knife. An antique bayonet. Each tale based on a true story.

DAMN THE SOURCE / sample chapter / WARHEAD

Adam Staropolski, an ageing ex-spy, is taking a final walk around London, a city which was his political playground for many years. Now, as his best friend General Jaruzelski lies in a morgue in Poland, the capital bites back.

About the author / Marek Kazmierski escaped communist Poland and settled in the UK as a child political refugee. He decided to become a writer, then worked as a librarian, a stripper and a prison governor, among others, to have something to write about. Today, he is translating, publishing and running a series of insider art initiatives. Not Shut Up, OFF_PRESS and Intersection are his babies.

WARHEAD

Satellites streamed images of the old General's demise from the other end of Europe straight into Adam Staropolski's North London living room. Slow-mo, constant repeat, pixellated blow-ups on all Polish news channels. The same ghastly scene of a bald, speckled man of eighty, thick dark glasses slipping from his nose, breathing his last on trial for high treason.

After a whole night of watching and drinking, Adam's failing eyes were having a hard time focusing. He had seen enough of General Jaruzelski, his old childhood friend, in the dock for the supposed crime of crushing Solidarity and declaring martial law those thirty years ago, to know his demise had not been accidental. Someone must have slipped something into his prison breakfast. Or his customary glass of water. Or even the little microphone pinned to his lapel. Death injected or vapourised or swallowed. None in their game cared about traces of evidence, not since Litvinienko and his execution in that little sushi place in the heart of London. A radiation pill in a cup of black tea, flown over all the way from the Kremlin. The insane cheek of it. Litvinienko been ex-secret police too. FSB, KGB, and so what? With his Putin-backed killers still at large, nothing and no one could think themselves sacred or safe.

The sound of envelopes crashing through the letterbox in the hallway jolted him. Christmas was almost here, but was it too early for the real post man? Could it be a set up? Sarin in a greetings card? Even an old-fashioned letter bomb, pretending to be a seasonal gift?

Swaying, Adam rose from his armchair and walked through a forest of empty Guinness bottles towards the window and the old television set stood by it. Early light streamed through the lace curtains, piercing the low crowd of brown glass all around his slippers. During the weeks of hearings, as he had got drunker and drunker and the number of empty bottles grew, he had stopped taking them into the kitchen and simply let them collect on the living room floor, entertaining himself in breaks between hearings by arranging the little brown soldiers in various patterns. Simple military parades at first, lined-up regiments of empties, in honour of the old general. Then more complex arrangements, a detailed map of Britain, stretching out across the carpet, and now a large eagle, the Polish national emblem, cut in half by the path he had left to the TV.

Now there was nothing more to see. No need for further distractions. He turned off the screen, but the old tube held on to the image of the former head of state slumped in the dock. Or perhaps Adam was only imagining it? Having watched the dictator, the demagogue, once Poland's most hated man, dying in full view of a thrilled public a hundred times over, it dawned on him, what they had done. The media. The stations. Maybe even the new secret services. Mocking that historic day in '81 when, in full uniform, the General had put himself on national TV reading out his martial law decree. On all channels. Constant repeat. Followed by tanks and arrests and killings. And now they were getting him back. Screening the footage of the old man expiring a thousand times over again and again, an act of the most modern vengeance.

Adam felt giddy. If they could do that to the General, mock this publicly, this viciously, they could easily come for him. Even here, in London, a thousand miles distant. He walked back through the glowing glass bird, stopped beside some fading pictures scattered on the coffee table next to the armchair. Teenage Adam and the twenty-something Jaruzelski outside of occupied Warsaw in '44. A year later, both of them riding a captured Tiger tank through the rubble of Berlin, Adam beaming, Wojtek poker-faced. Official photos from the Fifties and Sixties, two old friends now serving a Communist Poland. Jaruzelski climbing the army ranks, always in uniform, loyal from word go. Adam, then still called Aron, in a sharp, dark suit, part of the new political police force set up to scour the People's Republic of Poland, hunting down the last of the partisan freedom fighters left over from the real war.

Adam gathered up the photographs, the only evidence he had left of his old life, then drew himself straight, staring out the window, expecting surveillance or even snipers to be waiting across the street. In that one moment of fear in his own house, he chose: no more waiting – he would strike before being struck. He would demand protection from the Polish embassy. Though he had not stepped through those doors since 1989, once he explained his past, showed them the photos and the papers, code words, letters, negatives, they would have to offer him sanctuary. Ship him to Poland, probably. Under another new name. One last chance to start over again.

Adam turned to look at his old living room. Everything perfectly English. Immaculately staged. The furnishings, the books, the piano, just like his accent. No pictures of any family. No evidence of tedious

passions or hobbies. Nothing to show the unnatural machinery under the surface.

He caught himself looking in the massive mirror in the hallway. The ever dapper, ever tall, ever devastatingly handsome devil. At seventy something, he still could charm the pants off anything. That smile, teeth gleaming their porcelain lie. The baritone that melted thought and turned the stupidest remark into the wittiest come-on. And now the panic in the eyes as the front door rattled and another batch of junk mail dropped onto the hallway floor.

Hurriedly, he slipped on some shoes, grabbed his long overcoat, stuffed the photos in its inside pocket and left through the kitchen. On his way out, he pulled a long bayonet knife from the hiding place behind the fridge. The final souvenir from the battlefields of Russia, Poland and Germany. He secured the custom-made leather scabbard on a belt across his chest, concealed beneath his mac. It felt good, the weight of the weapon against his rib cage. Felt like the best and the last of him.

The unkempt garden had a gate at the bottom, leading to a narrow alleyway. Adam unbolted the latch and used the mirror mounted above the gate to see if the coast was clear. He waited a few moments for footsteps or any other tell-tale rustling to reach his ageing ears. When nothing happened, he opened the wooden door and left the house which had been his home for the loneliest and dullest years of his life.

Stumbling down the street, thoughts raced him along the uneven pavement. Had he locked his own front door? How had he managed to put on two non-matching shoes? Why had he forgotten his hat? This was Golders Green after all. The Jewish quarter. One blended in here wearing a wide-brimmed trilby. Though the district was as much Japanese now as anything else, all these little immaculate people driving their BMWs and Mercedes, evidence who the real winners of all wars were.

Once upon a time, he had spied on Poles exiled in London, feeding information back to Warsaw and sometimes even directly to the Kremlin. Impressing everyone with his new name, Staropolski, selected for its nationalistic echoes and for its lack of typically Polish consonant clusters which could have been enough to slow his entry into polite London society. “Star” sounded promising and “polski” patriotic enough and so everyone warmed to his tales of wartime daring-do, his noble roots, dating back to the Russian royal courts, and now his tragic “exile”. The Russians had paid for information on Polish émigrés. The British for information on the communists. The Americans for anything on anyone, the greedy primitives. But now the Brits were not interested, the Yanks had forgotten him, even his own freshly and freely elected government cutting him off. His savings would not last forever, and he was now too old to gamble his way back into affluence. The taxi rank near the tube station called to him with memories of times when he could still afford black cab rides in and out of the West End. When he could afford to play politics and casino tables and the stock markets and not worry about money running out on him. Adam Staropolski had seen too much not to matter, and yet...

Stumbling towards the Tube, he tried to remember how he had come by that name, exactly. Was it invented or had he actually taken it off someone who had died on the way to Siberia, that long march where anyone who fell would instantly be picked clean of valuables and clothing and any ID that might be worth something in some post-War dream? Had he invented it himself sometime after his enrolment in the Polish branch of the Red Army? Or did that come later, after the fighting stopped and the Wall went up?

He was finding it impossible to remember all the things he had once been paid to forget. Still, if he couldn't recall its origin, no one else would ever know. Of course, the real Adam Staropolski might one day yet show up. His doppelgänger. His nemesis self. Would he then have to go back to being the boy he was before the war? The blond child running from mass graves, from burning fields, into the arms of more soldiers?

He shuddered and flew, the bright red wall of a bendy bus passing inches from his face. No horns, no shouts, his thin, frail body tossed aside by the slipstream, landing on the pavement, almost breaking his hip on the edge of a stone kerb. The pain a warning. But he could handle it, he thought, taking deep, forced breaths, putting the shock to good use, as he had been trained to do. He rose slowly, resting his hands on the ground a second, his breath catching up. Some passers-by tried to help, but he waved them away angrily, afraid they would touch him, steady him, find the weapon strapped to his chest.

The woman selling tickets at the Tube station had to be Polish, with a name badge like Bożena. She spoke fluent English, at least, sold

him a little orange travelcard with a magnetic strip on the back. All he had to do to get through the gates was feed it into an electronic slot. Paper talking to metal, electricity, computers, all registering the trail of his movement through space. Could they follow him this way? He thought not, tried to keep the panic at bay, but as he turned the corner of the narrow tunnel leading towards the platforms, he came face to face with a man holding a giant, silenced machine gun. His heart almost stopped, though there was also a split second of joy, of feeling up for it, for the heat of the bullet.

But all it was was a damned film poster. James Bond again. As if there hadn't been enough of the same old, same old three generations ago. Adam remembered reading Fleming's original four decades back. Remembered the sweet ache of recognition. But now, staring at the film star before him, jaw locked, gaze frozen, fake gun cocked, he couldn't even manage disgust. Ian Fleming must be turning in his grave, he thought. At least the old boys of the big screen, the Bogies and the Marvins and the Coopers had fought in real wars, shot real people with all the real guns. The 21st century now, you would have thought the world would have wised up. Dumped the overpaid and oversexed civil servants with licenses to kitsch. He felt like spitting at the size of the gun on the poster. An automatic rifle with that massive silencer. Bloody guaranteed to overheat and jam. Bloody poseurs. Bloody traitors to the true art of killing.

Standing on the empty platform, knowing it was covered by cameras, he felt a little safer. They were unlikely to try anything here, with a lens on every corner. Still, he wished he'd left himself at least one

gun to see retire with. A small Smith and Wesson, or his old PP5. As naive, as easy to detest the Home Army partisans had been, at least they knew how to knock up a gun or two. Weapons made in small workshops or garages, not factories, by men who would fire the damn things themselves. Those guns never broke, never jammed. And it was such stupid pleasure shooting the blasted idiots with their own, home-made machinery.

Boarding a tube carriage, having to bend down to get his head through the doors, Adam thought with distaste about the weapon the new Bond carried. Any rifle could be used to hunt from a distance. Handguns were special. They did the devil's work. Only good for killing men, at close range. Sitting down and staring at his fellow passengers, as they read their thrillers or played with their high tech phones, he savoured the truth of the chosen few.

He woke as the train pulled into Elephant and Castle. Literally snapped to attention, his injured hip making him wince. The carriage was now full. People made way for his elderly, imposing frame. He instinctively checked for the knife and the photographs and his wallet, all seemingly in place, then, barking requests to get past, shoved his way towards the door.

Once the train was gone, he approached a Tube map. He had meant to get off at Waterloo, but after a whole night of sleepless mourning, he had to forgive himself for succumbing. Still, safer here than anywhere else. The brightly coloured spaghetti twirled before him, but his eyes wouldn't focus. He needed air anyway. Narrow tunnels led on and on, arrows pointing towards exits and fire escapes and

emergency staircases. He was starting to shake again. Not wide awake yet, not anywhere near sober, his blood tense.

His shoes rang strange, irregular clicks bouncing off the porcelain walls of tunnel after tunnel. Eventually, he came to the lifts. Dangerous things, lifts, but he had no choice. Waiting for the numbers to descend, he stared at a poster for a new television show. "You have no idea how far I am willing to go" said the blurb, another fair-haired Bond-alike sticking a Beretta into thousands of commuter faces.

The lift doors opened and he noticed, among ads for gay musicals and herbal supplements, another blood-stained poster, drilled with fake bullet holes, advertising a new Patricia Cornwell paperback. It made him smile, patting the scabbard beneath his mac. People still had sin inside them. All of them angry and wild and weak.

Out on the surface, he navigated the electronic gates and found himself outside. This was Elephant and Castle? He could still remember it from 1968. Dirty, but uniform, at least. Houses all of a kind. The faces all white. Now, everything a mess. Thirties, Seventies, Eighties architectures all mixing in rows of dumb chaos. What had happened to good old fashioned British conservative sense and taste? Who was responsible for this town going to the dogs this badly?

James Bond flew by him again, giant now, stretched across the side of a double-decker bus, but Adam was no longer laughing. Not amused. A sign pointed him in the direction of Westminster. Would he cab, bus or walk it? The sun was low in the sky, but that was just winter. He stumbled past black face after black face. How ghastly the human race looked close up, in all its diverse, poor, pedestrian glory.

Paki. Chink. Polak. Stinking scum. Everyone with class had left long ago, moving out to Surrey, Kent or Sussex.

Breathing hard, he stopped and propped himself up against a railing. A young Indian woman approached, asked if he was OK. But he was not OK. Violence was exploding inside him, deep in his veins, in his aching joints, in his tired heart. As she kept talking, her hand resting on his shoulder, he clutched at his chest to feel the scabbard, then looked up, read the poster visible over her shoulder on the Salvation Army building. "Is there light in the darkness? We think so!"

"Stupid, stupid scum," he whispered to himself, smiling weakly.

"Pardon?" asked the woman. Adam took his eyes off the poster and focused on her face.

"I've been to Bombay. Karachi. Bengal. Wherever you are from, child, go back there. What do you know about light and dark?"

"Excuse me?"

"What do you know about salvation? I was in the army. Proper army..." The shock and confusion in her pale brown eyes delighted him. He accentuated each word, tuning his upper-class vowels to cause maximum offence. "I had a girl like you once. A gyppo. Found her in the woods. Gyppos come from India, did you know that? She begged. For mercy. Army? Army, child? Come with me. Come and I'll show you death." The Imperial War Museum, his favourite London haunt, was at the end of the street, but even though he tugged at the sleeve of her woollen blazer, he was not strong enough to overcome her resistance.

The woman pulled away, stumbling on high heels, looking back, then rushing off. He realised, the heat in his veins cooling, that he had got something wrong. Some wire crossed. She was not from the church.

In fact, she might be about to scream or call the police. He sneered.

Yes, she was like that very one. When they were rounding up the partisans. Mostly Home Army heroes. How many had they tortured and killed? How many girlfriends and wives taken on the promise that their flesh would secure release? He remembered the gypsy girl they'd found in the woods near Lodz. Spitting image of this city girl. She had begged him not to take her virginity. That would mean she would be dirt and disgrace to her clan, that she would be killed upon return. He fucked her in every way imaginable, except for that once sacred place. That he had left for the lads that followed him. He had honoured her request, but could not be held accountable for the actions of his men. They were still at war, after all. A war over the soul, if no longer the body, of Europe.

Those had been the best times. That decade after the War. While the future General got busy climbing official ladders, Adam had, with his best friend's patronage, set to work. The hours after the battle are always the most interesting. When real profits are to be made. When no one is accountable, no noise registers, only the gods watching. He'd been in his teens then, without any kind of mercy. Had the strength for it.

Later, the real politics took over. Real human nature. Wojtek had used the anti- Semitic purges of '68 as an excuse to get Adam out of Poland, but in truth there was nothing left for him to do. The fighting had stopped. The dull grey monolith of actual communism in place. With his talent for performance and languages, Adam left Aron behind and steered himself towards freedom.

As he stumbled on towards the Imperial War Museum, he realised it would not look good if that girl did call the law and they stopped him here, a twelve-inch bayonet strapped to his breast instead of medals. He thought of sneaking into a pub, hiding out an hour or so, but pubs were lonely places at this sort of early hour. Dangerous. He needed a drink, but heartburn was already piercing a hole in his chest. Besides, he didn't like the name of the only one in sight. The Prince of Wales. Adam could only mourn over what old Elizabeth must have thought, every single day of the many long years since that fool had been born. They had all hoped Diana would turn him around, provide the spine the throne needed, but she turned into a Pandora in Paris.

He stopped at the end of St George's Road, stared at the church across the traffic lights, a stunning Gothic castle flying a dirty, torn St. George's Cross. It only now occurred to him that the English and Polish flags shared the same colours, only the former was inappropriately more religious in sentiment. How strange. And shameful. The colours of the King and Queen flapping like dirty washing in the wind of the cold morning.

Outside the museum, two giant marine cannons pointed to the sky. Churchill's two-fingered salute made manifest. But now there was something else in the courtyard – a chunk of the Berlin Wall, graffiti screaming "CHANGE YOUR LIFE".

Change it for what? What life? Inside, noise. A thousand kids clambering over tanks, cannons, staring up at fighter and bomber planes suspended from the ceiling like Airfix models. At the back of the mezzanine, a life-sized model of Little Boy sat perched in the middle of

the floor. Bigger rockets and missiles surrounded it, but nothing had the simple, honest power of that final lump of killing. Schoolboys were messing about in the cut-up cockpit of a Lancaster bomber next to it, those waiting to go in leaning against the nuclear grenade, slouching in ignorance.

He took the lift to the basement and the archives of the last, true Great War. Walking down a long concourse, he had to work hard to focus on the photos. One of a child, battered, in a hospital bed, next to it the legend "War is a part of God's creation". Hello me, Aron thought. This boy, this patient, clinging to a fluffy toy he never got to have before the NKVD grabbed and turned him into a front line scout.

Another picture, a teenage boy, the Red Star crowning his forehead, handgun held aloft, the caption screaming "The essence of war is violence and moderation in war is imbecility".

Yes and yes and yes, as he stumbled on into the tight corridors filled with display cases of murderous mementoes. Uniforms, decorations, newspapers, weapons, bags, photos. Silent crowds milling, edging past each other; taking half an hour, and covering a half century of a world at war with itself.

The Soviet section welcomed him with red, velvet lined warmth. This he remembered. This he knew. His old gun, the Bolo, in a glass case, just like the one he had once stolen from a Soviet officer's tent. He tried to count how often he'd fired, how many kills, but couldn't recall. How many had died by his hand while the War raged? And after? He couldn't say. Was his mind failing him? Or had he never actually involved himself that far? Had he ever killed, or was it always the quiet,

charmless others? He could now not, in his heaving heart of hearts, say either way.

Himmler's smiling death mask, locked in a glass cabinet, chased him back out to the upper floors. All seemed taken up with Holocaust exhibitions. He stumbled through whitewashed corridors without looking up at the photos and the model camps and the piles of shoes and glasses. What did he care for this mock up? His family left behind in Siberia, exterminated by the forces apparently trapped in these displays, while he had made his escape. Headphones here, video screens there. Such awful spectacle. He, a blond Jew. A survivor. Only that mattered.

He rushed out of the entrance hall, past the kids and the weapons of mass destruction, out the door, beneath the long shadow of those giant cannons and into the nearest pub. It looked dark and decent enough from the outside, a good old fashioned boozier. But it turned out to be crammed full of students. Art students. He couldn't remember the name of the college, but had some recollection of Feliks Topolski and his crew of painters and hangers-on drinking around here in the Sixties and Seventies.

A young black woman approached.

"You all right, gramps?"

He stared at her, wounded by the past and the present simultaneously.

"Look in the mirror, will you, dear? We're not exactly of the same breed," he spat out in perfect Queen's English, then shoved what was left of his strength back against the door.

Westminster Palace eventually towered over him, but he just sneered back. No wonder the Empire had fallen. Resting on such meagre laurels. He would never forget the first time he had visited the Kremlin. Now, there was a seat of power. None of the subtle finery of fairytale English gothica. No, the Kremlin towered vast above all and rightly so.

Churchill. Wojtek. Stalin. All the immaculate greats, dead. Adam felt like crying as St James' Park glowed with cool winter light. His old haunts were near by. Claridge's. The Connaught Rooms. But cash was tight and his lines of credit expired long ago.

He stumbled into the nearest pub on Whitehall. Didn't even clock the name over the door. His body thirsted for alcohol and rest. The Guinness took forever to pour. Stout was the only drink he could take now without gagging, but he ordered a double scotch to go with it, just for old times' sake. He took a seat at the back of the beer lounge, as far as he could get from a party of suits drinking themselves into early oblivion. One of them wore a giant Stetson on top of a ridiculous yellow wig, tinsel wrapped round the brim. Christmas jollies. Nobody seemed to mind.

Some middle aged American tourists disturbed his rest, taking up a dozen seats on the table next to him. The wives shtum and the men bursting with bravado. Once everyone had settled, they started talking ailments. Ear this, tooth that, back the other. Adam, with at least twenty, thirty years on all of them, had suffered prisoner of war camps, labour camps, round-ups, starvation, the bowels of all triumphs, yet you

would never hear him complain about his lungs and mind and pumping heart.

Refreshed by the booze, he managed to stumble as far as the National Gallery. There was silence here, and security in every room, and such sensible crowds to hide him from harm. This too was the one place you really could bet on finding beautiful women in London. They could be from anywhere in the world and all of them luminous. Was it the place which graced them with such light? Or was it aesthetic sensibility, the need to admire and be admired? He lost count of how many he had picked up here, got drunk and fucked in various hotels and student digs. He had amassed no friends or hobbies in his four London decades. Those fleeting moments of rape had been his only sport, and he cherished the ones who screamed and resisted and did not take his violence in bed for granted, following all the wining and dining and posh talk.

Adam positioned himself behind a beautiful, raven haired woman, almost as tall as him now. Hands in his pockets, he began to play with himself, eyes focused only on the dark waterfall of her hair and its smell of pines and ginger and lime. He came in an instant, soiling his underpants, pale trousers thankfully hidden under the long mac. Was that it? So few seconds? Ah, the body fell away but it was not pleasure and not grace; only panic and the cold dawning of a definite end. This was not what he had lived for. This was wrong and a crime, and the way the woman's hair now fell away and shunned him with some horrid distance, it broke him in half. Instead of going all the way downstairs to clean up in the toilets, he slumped in a leather sofa set

before an El Greco and the woman and for the first time in decades wished for a cigarette.

One of the gallery attendants woke him, smiling meekly, asking if he was OK. Mumbling something to placate the old biddy, he shuffled on the bench of hard burgundy leather, every part of him jarring, the ghost of dreamless sleep still hovering over his shoulder.

Eventually, he rose, stretching to his full height, in spite of the pain. Hands in pockets, he staggered towards the revolving doors.

London streets were too full, too bright. Languages, Christmas lights, shadows everywhere. He was not safe. Sneaking north towards the embassy, he turned down Cecil Court and stumbled upon a tiny shop buying and selling memorabilia. He stared through the window display into a time he wanted back. Old prints, furniture, a transistor radio up on a white-painted shelf. Cork notice boards decorated with medals. Symbolic shrapnel attached to gaudy bits of coloured ribbon. A WWI German Next of Kin Cross, £10. A Polish Cross of Valour 5th Class WWII, £75. More expensive than an Iron Cross at £50, though perhaps only so because it was so much rarer, given out to so few compared to the Third Reich's marks of glory.

The skies over Portland Place were turning dark by the time he rang the doorbell. The intercom asked his name and he gave it, the door eventually buzzed open.

The silver-haired doorman in the grand hall enquired in Polish about his reason for calling round. Adam stated, back erect, that he was

an old soldier, an old serviceman in danger, and needed to speak to the ambassador. The doorman looked sceptical, but eventually nodded and led him through to the ground floor reception room, a vast space of tall ceilings and gaudy Roccoco décor. Adam took a gilded chair, watched the doorman disappear and busied himself studying his surroundings. The furnishings disgusted him, especially the out-of-place contemporary wall hanging of the Polish eagle, a golden crown on its head, its eyes strangely sad, mourning past tragedies. How many decades since he had been in here, and even then only ever sneaking in round the back? He had made up for it in other grand halls and ballrooms of the land, but if this was to be a return home, he felt a tinge of disappointment at the antique theatricals.

Adam prided himself at having the patience of a rock, but it felt like an age before a thirty-something man, in a suit of cheap charcoal fabric, tie knotted in some frightful fashion, entered and sat down on the opposite side of the dining table.

“My name is Pawel Brocki. I am the deputy consul here in London. What is it I can do for you?”

“Adam Staropolski. I require protection.”

“I know who you are, sir. What is it you need protecting from?”

“My real name is Aron Majer, I am a former...”

“I know that name too. I’ve studied your file, along with a few other ‘ghosts’ such as yourself. You keep haunting London, but I’m not sure what it is you want from us.”

“If you know my history, then you understand if I say I am in danger.”

“Danger? What sort of danger?”

“Assassination. Assault.”

Brocki’s plump face twisted in dismissive fashion.

“And who do you think might want to kill you, Mr Majer?”

“The same people who killed General Jaruzelski yesterday.”

“Killed? I had no idea he’d been killed. I thought the old man simply snuffed it in that dock.”

Adam felt the air in the room turn cold.

“Snuffed?”

“Heart attack, Mr Majer. That’s all it was. What is it your paranoid past is leading you to believe? That someone assassinated the old devil? And might be after you next? Hardly.”

“You know who I am and you know what I know. I suggest you listen...”

“I’d rather not. And frankly, if I weren’t a civil servant, Mr... whatever you choose to call yourself these days, I would throw you out onto that street myself.” The air between the two men had turned solid. Adam watched as the young apparatchik’s face tensed and turned pink. “If I could, I would go further. I have read your file, and let me tell you, my grandfather was in the Home Army. I never met him, only had the privilege of holding his medals, the buttons from his uniform, because someone had killed him long after the War was over. Someone hunted, tortured and then murdered him, for the crime of fighting for a free motherland. Someone like you, Mr Majer. And it doesn’t matter to me if it was you who had signed the order or loaded the gun or even pulled the trigger. In his name, sir, in his name I would dearly love to put my hands around your fucking neck and squeeze until your eyes popped

out of your evil head. You are scum, sir, the kind of scum I am charged with protecting my country from.”

“Ah.”

“Ah, that is bloody right, ah. So now leave, Mr Majer, because there will be no refuge, no protection for the likes of you on our soil today.”

Adam was now smiling. To conceal his own self-disgust. How stupid it had been of him to come here. The booze and the grief were part responsible, but were no excuse. The consul’s eyes were on fire, while Adam looked right back and calculated. He had the knife. He could take this childish fool hostage, but somehow he lacked the energy to unbutton his coat.

“How old are you, boy? Twenty? Thirty?” Adam made sure his voice pierced with the ruthlessness he had just been charged with long ago. “What have you seen? What do you know? You know my name from a file. I know the Queen. Lords and ladies and heroes.” Adam stood up, adrenaline helping him straighten his sore back. “But these words mean nothing to you. Because you know nothing. And nobodies. You only know nobodies, boy...”

Outside, Adam wanted to scream obscenities at the tall windows, but his breeding and his training held him back. Still, he was having a hard time breathing. The world around him dark, tiny spots of mineral in the pavement slabs shimmering under the street lamps. He bent double, clutching his chest. This time not to check for the knife or his wallet, but to still his own heart. In the past, self-restraint, the swallowing of pride and walking away instead of killing sheep such as

that consul, would have cost him nothing. Today, it felt like crucifixion.

Head spinning, he knelt on the pavement, then rested against a slim tree planted right outside the embassy door. He felt sleepy, but knew the third nap of the day might be his last, and so calmly started taking deep breaths, whistling to keep himself awake on each exhale. Groaning a little any time his hip twisted and hurt with the effort.

“Hello, uncle. You all right?”

Adam looked up to see the round, brown face of a pedal-cab driver staring down at him, concerned.

“Fine.”

“You not look it. You want lift somewhere?”

“No. Off you bleeding well go.”

“You looks pale, Uncle. Maybe I give you free ride somewhere.” Adam could not place the accent, nor gather the strength to repel the boy. “I go back to base. Waterloo. You want, I take you St Thomas’ Hospital, uncle.”

Adam looked up at the windows of the consulate. Blinked a few times, ran the leathery palm of his hand down his face. No sweat. No sweat ever. Cool as damned hell.

They rolled down Regent’s Street, towards Piccadilly Circus. The rickshaw had no suspension, rattling and shaking on every awful pothole, making the ride agony. Adam let his head roll a little to the side, the bright lights of the dark city flashing past. Christmas decorations were ablaze everywhere, but all he could think of was the history beneath the wrapping. Trafalgar Square. Villiers Street. Waterloo. All the military names, all the fighting. The past formed of

blood. Shaped by minds such as his. He could hear his joints creaking. Feel his bones turning to dust. But the anger against it all rising within him, as young as ever, as fierce.

They rolled past Nelson's lions, Adam silent, feeling like what strength he had just used up he would never get back. He dreamt of falling asleep, of never waking again, surrendering in the wake of his old friend, but the night was shut tight against his wishes. Though he hadn't had a drink since lunch, his head spun as if loaded on gin and vodka. He gasped for breath and once regained, started whispering. Almost silent. Polish. Russian. German. Obscenity after obscenity. Curse upon curse. All those harsh, foreign-tasting consonant clusters. He wanted now, just once more, to call words into action. Not to be a cripple, a forgotten keeper of faded secrets, an unnecessary file ready for the pyre. Wojtek had had his moments of public glory, the ass. The ass! Where were his? Where the hell...

His voice fell to the street, then down to the river they were crossing, ripped to nothing by whirling spokes. Bruce was singing an alien song, somewhere far above, the warm voice floating off across the Thames. Adam's chest felt tight. Worried this might be it, he clutched at his breast, but instead of an irregular heartbeat, his hand found the concealed scabbard. As the rickshaw bounced on across Waterloo Bridge, Adam smiled. Remembering the maze of arches beneath Waterloo East, where he imagined they were heading. Where it was dark and quiet and perfect, he thought, staring at the broad back and shoulders perched over the handlebars before him, for one last little bit of action.

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