

Artistic Dispatch

"He's grown soft. He's not the man we knew," Prime Minister Sergei Koslov lamented. "After his latest capitulation to the West our future is at risk."

A rumble of agreement arose from the men attending a secret meeting at Koslov's dacha on the Black Sea coast.

Yuri murmured, "So, you think it's time?"

Koslov's eyes narrowed. "Haven't you been listening? There's no doubt it's time. The question is how?" he barked.

Waves crashing outside eagerly filled the sudden vacuum in the room as the men measured each other with questioning eyes. Finally, a chair scraped the wood floor, then creaked as General Krupin leaned forward and cleared his throat nervously. "Sergei?"

Koslov's laser-like stare found its mark between the General's eyes. "Yes Krupin?"

"I've had a team working on this particular scenario since our last meeting. You're familiar of course with the Cataha Obnimat'sya project?"

"Satan's Embrace," Koslov acknowledged.

Krupin's breath caught momentarily as his gaze swept the other men. "We think it might have merit."

"A poison gas?" Koslov grunted in amusement. "What? We just pump it into his office and everyone thinks Vasili died of natural causes?"

"Not exactly," the General responded with a grim smile.

"What then?"

"This invisible, odorless gas is more virulent than ricin and virtually undetectable during autopsy. Plus, it dissipates rapidly which makes it a perfect assassination tool. Most importantly, our researchers conceived an inventive method of getting it to our victim. They compounded a gel that encapsulates the gas molecules. When exposed to air the gel dissolves after about fifteen minutes releasing the gas."

"That still does not tell me how you get it up Antonin's nose," the Prime Minister replied impatiently.

"Art!"

"Art? What the hell are you talking about?"

The General couldn't help but smile at Koslov's confusion. "We apply the substance onto an oil painting and put it on the wall of his office."

“And he’s just going to let you do that?” Koslov laughed derisively.

The General nodded toward Propaganda Minister Ivan Gusev.

“We can stage a public art contest. There would be a cash prize and the winner’s painting will hang for a time in the President’s office. It would be great PR for the Party,” Ivan explained. “We could literally kill two birds with one stone,” he joked sardonically.

Once again there was silence in the room...all eyes riveted on the Prime Minister. Eventually his trademark frown transformed into a wide grin. “Damn, it could work.”

Koslov stood ill at ease after explaining the art contest to President Vasili Antonin who did not even glance at him during his discourse, but continued working on one of many documents littering his desk. Finally Antonin looked up and frowned. “I’m busy damnit. Do whatever you want, just get out of here!”

Four weeks later found Koslov once again standing in front of the President's desk. This time he carried a sizable, framed oil painting depicting a stand of large trees with a winding stone path snaking between them. The frame was tightly bound in transparent plastic wrap. “Where do you want me to hang this?” Koslov asked.

Antonin looked up from his computer, angry at being disturbed. “Hang what you imbecile?”

“It..it’s the winner of the art contest,” Koslov stammered as he held up the painting so Antonin could see.

“So, why are you bringing it here?” Antonin demanded.

“According to the contest rules it’s supposed to hang in your office for a month.”

“That piece of crap is not going to hang in here,” the President declared as he turned back to his monitor.

“But sir, the rules were...”

Antonin suddenly bolted from behind his desk, grabbed the painting from Koslov and stormed out closely followed by a bodyguard. Koslov stood bewildered wondering what to do. Just as he thought about checking to see where Antonin went, the President returned to his desk and the bodyguard took up a position behind him. “What happened to the painting?” Koslov asked worriedly.

“It’s where a non-art connoisseur will enjoy it. Now get back to your office.”

When the Prime Minister reached the door, Antonin yelled, “Hey!” Koslov turned and a ball of plastic wrap bounced off his chest. “I just sent you an encrypted communique. I need a detailed response within the hour.” Antonin turned to his bodyguard as Koslov left. “Make sure he stays in his office until it’s done.”