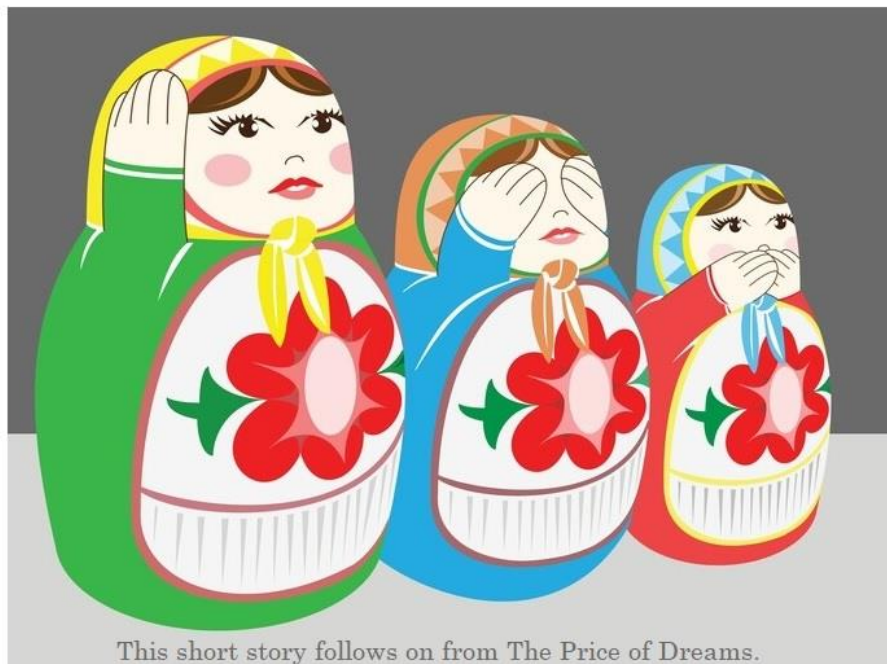


# Strictly off the Record

by  
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This short story follows on from *The Price of Dreams*.

1.

NINA BEGISHVELI'S personal assistant came in with the usual pile of letters. Having already read them, she proceeded to summarise each one quickly for Nina. The great majority were predictable enough: requests for extra funding, complaints about delayed salary payments, leaking roofs and broken windows that hadn't been repaired or the lack of textbooks and equipment. One letter told of a specialised secondary school where the head teacher had sold all its machine tools and disappeared.

For the most part, Nina delegated the letters to one or other of her task forces. She dictated replies to some and kept a few back in order to discuss them with her advisors.

Near the bottom of the pile was a letter from Moscow. 'The All Union Channel want to interview you.'

'Must be my lucky day. Do they say what about?'

Her personal assistant squinted at the letter. 'Ooh, it's Sergei Ivanov. He's quite dishy.' She looked at Nina and grinned. 'Sorry. Serious face: "Sergei Ivanov is preparing a documentary in which he interviews former political prisoners who are now in government in different parts of the Soviet Union."' "

Sergei Ivanov? Nina had seen him on TV often enough. In his late forties or early fifties, Ivanov was an iconoclastic reporter, firmly in the reformist camp, who had only become prominent over the last two or three years. When she first saw him, Nina had felt that there was something familiar about his name, a connection that went back a long way, but she couldn't work out what it was. Perhaps she had just imagined it. After all, an awful lot of Russian men were called either Sergei or Ivanov.

And yes, he was attractive, in a slightly rakish way. Nina suspected he was a bit of a drinker.

She wondered why Ivanov had chosen to interview her. She was hardly the most important ex-dissident in the Ksord-Akhtarian government. Still, the exposure wouldn't be a bad thing. Lots of people in Ksordia-Akhtaria still watched Russian-language TV, which these days was generally less hysterical than the stations in their own languages. It would also be nice to get her face splashed across the whole Soviet Union, a way to say hello to some of the Russians and others who had been her friends in the prisons and labour camps where she had spent more than half of the last decade.

'When does he want to see me?'

'A week on Friday, in the afternoon.'

'Am I available?'

'It can be done.'

'Okay. Where does he want to do it?'

'Here.'

‘Remind me to tidy my desk before he comes.’

‘Will do, but you should put some lipstick on, just for a change. Or lip-gloss at the very least. And wear that violet blouse with a collar. You look really good in that.’

‘Yes ma’am. Tell him three-thirty.’

For the next ten days, Nina was, as usual, swept up in the whirlwind that her life had become since her release from captivity. But the forthcoming interview with Sergei Ivanov kept popping back into her head. There was one possible question that worried her: ‘What do you think you have achieved since you became Minister of Education?’

Because what had she achieved? All her dreams of being a great reformer depended on having some money at her disposal. And that was something she simply didn’t have. The Ksord-Akhtarian government was finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet as the economic turmoil that had undermined the Communists turned into outright collapse. Supply chains were disintegrating. Even factories that could still sell what they produced found themselves idle because they were unable to source raw materials or spare parts for machines that had broken down.

As for the shops, if they had been half-empty in the final years of Communist rule, they were three-quarters empty now. People had to choose between queuing for three or four hours at a time for basic necessities or braving a black market where price rises vastly outstripped any increases in pay.

Without even bothering to inform Moscow, the Ksord-Akhtarian government had taken to printing its own roubles in an effort to stay afloat. Much of this money was sucked into the black hole that food price subsidies had become, leaving ministers like Nina with barely a kopek to spend on the rotting school buildings she had inherited, or on new sets of textbooks that weren’t full of Communist lies, or even salaries for teachers, many of whom were forced to supplement their sporadic income by working as unofficial taxi drivers, street hawkers or, in one case that had recently hit the headlines, as a prostitute.

Nina's working life had turned into a nightmare of fighting fires: teachers on strike because they hadn't been paid, students striking to demand whatever it was they were demanding this week, and three of the republic's four regional governments doing everything in their power to sabotage her efforts.

Cabinet meetings had become intolerable. Ksordia-Akhtaria's 'unity' government was a collection of enemies who could hardly bear to sit in the same room and who undermined each other at every opportunity.

The Communist Party had split in two, and these two groups of former comrades detested each other with a passion. It seemed to Nina that even those nationalist and democrat ministers who had recently come out of prisons and labour camps didn't hate the Communists as much as the Communists hated one another.

Not that the nationalists were any better. Where Ksordian, Akhtarian and Tatar nationalists had once banded together to undermine the Communists, the Ksords and the Akhtarians no longer trusted each other a millimetre. Nina's democrats and their Tatar allies tried to work with the more sensible among them, but it was becoming increasingly difficult.

She worried that her forthcoming interview would be a bit like the months of interrogation she had endured at the hands of the KGB. She had learned how to avoid falling into the traps that her interrogators set for her. She had learned how to cope with the tiredness, hunger and thirst, the craving for nicotine, the disorientation brought on by never seeing daylight, and the freezing cold cells with a mattress just five centimetres thick.

But a greater challenge than all this had been to hide the extent to which her hopes had been extinguished. How many times had she despaired that every time she and her comrades managed to get anything off the ground, it turned out to be riddled with informers? How many times had she wondered what it would take to make the great mass of people turn against Communist misrule?

Now she had all the food, coffee and cigarettes she needed. She had a soft, warm bed and, for the last six months, a warm body to share it with.

But back then, even at the very worst of times, she had been comforted by the thought that if only they could get rid of the Communists, everything would be all right. She now understood that this had been an illusion. Communist rule was coming to an end but everything was falling apart and nobody knew how to put it all back together again.

Enough. Enough.

Forget all this pessimism of the intellect.

Concentrate on optimism of the will.

You have to keep fighting.

You have to keep pushing, keep trying to achieve something, anything, amidst all the chaos of the collapse of the *ancien régime*.

2.

SERGEI IVANOV and his camera crew arrived twenty minutes early. Ivanov was as debonair in person as he was on TV, and surprisingly dark for a Russian – Nina guessed that he must be half-Jewish or half-Armenian. He was certainly a charmer. He greeted Nina's staff warmly and chatted with them while his cameraman checked the lighting in her office. The latter declared himself satisfied but said he would need a spotlight. This suited Nina's busy schedule perfectly: 'If you need a spotlight, we have to finish pretty quick. The power usually goes off at four.'

'In that case, I'd better drag Seryozha away from your staff,' said Ivanov's director. 'They seem to be getting on very well.'

Nina looked through her door and saw her personal assistant with Ivanov. She looked like she was his for the taking.

In the event, Ivanov didn't ask Nina a single question about education, and he seemed to regard economic collapse as a given that was scarcely worth talking about. Instead, he was more interested in the increasingly fraught relations between the Ksords and the Akhtarians. These had been seriously aggravated by the riots at a recent football match between Dynamo Zeda'Anta and Red Star Ronkoni, respectively the biggest Akhtarian and Ksordian clubs.

The game itself had been bad-tempered enough, with eight yellow cards and two reds. But the scenes on the terraces had been far worse, with repeated clashes between the rival fans and three

pitch invasions. The referee later said he might have abandoned the match altogether had he not feared for his and the players' lives if he did so.

As soon as the full-time whistle blew, three thousand Ronkoni ultras charged the Zeda'Anta supporters in the nearby stand. Mayhem ensued that the police didn't have the numbers to subdue. The violence spilled outside the stadium as the Ronkoni fans rampaged through the streets of the Akhtarian capital before smashing up the central bus station on their way home.

Akhtarians were universally outraged by these events, their fury stoked further by the reception these hooligans received when their buses reached Ronkoni. Instead of being arrested, they were cheered by large crowds of nationalist extremists, who celebrated their 'victory' over the 'Rebel' enemy.

The Akhtarian regional government blamed the failure to contain the violence on the police major in charge of security at the stadium. Because he was a Ksord, he was accused of being in cahoots with the hooligans. The regional government now undertook a massive purge throughout the territory it controlled, dismissing every single Ksordian police officer above the rank of sergeant, along with every Ksordian judge and prosecuting attorney. This further destabilised southern Akhtaria, where most of the population were Ksords.

The Akhtarian government also announced the creation of a militia that was clearly intended to be the nucleus of a future Akhtarian army. 'The Ksords will never again invade our country,' the regional President proclaimed. 'You can be sure of that.'

At the end of the interview, as his camera crew started to pack away their equipment, Ivanov invited Nina for a coffee. 'I'd quite like it if we could have a conversation off the record, just me and you.'

This caught Nina by surprise. 'What about?'

'A mutual acquaintance.'

'Who's that?'

'Ruslan Shanidza.'

3.

NINA DIDN'T really have time for this but her curiosity got the better of her. 'So there must be a connection,' she thought. 'Something to do with Ruslan, no doubt.'

She led Ivanov to a coffee shop not far from the ministry. They sat at the back, near two elderly Tatars who were playing an exceedingly slow game of chess. Ivanov ordered a glass of tea for Nina and Turkish coffee for himself. He brought out a hip flask to add vodka to his coffee.

'Would you like some?'

'No thanks. Still got lots of work to do.'

He offered her a *West* cigarette. 'Have you had one before?'

'No,' said Nina as they lit up. 'Where are they from?'

'West Germany. Well, Germany now, I suppose. I get sent to a conference there every now and then. Have you ever been?'

'No. I've never been outside the Soviet Union.'

As soon as the waiter had gone, Ivanov opened his jacket and lifted up his shirt to show that he wasn't wired. Nina smiled. She hoped she knew better than to let her guard down, whether he was wearing a hidden microphone or not.

'So you know Ruslan?'

'Sort of. We met quite a long time ago, before he was famous. It must be, what, twelve or thirteen years ago now. Gosh. Doesn't time fly?'

Nina realised who he was. He was the reporter who had helped Ruslan first time he was arrested.

'Me and my...well she's my ex-wife now, we were working at *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. They sent a group of us to a sanatorium in West Ksordia for a break, in Bogmaperdi. Have you been there?'

'I was there not long ago, actually. The students at the secondary polytechnic had gone on strike to demand a lowering of the pass marks in their exams. I had to go and say no and persuade them to go back to school.'

'Sounds like fun.'

'If you like that kind of thing.'

'It's a beautiful place, though, isn't it?'

‘So I’m told. I didn’t have time to look around, I’m afraid.’

Just at that moment, the power cut out and the interior of the café was plunged into semi-darkness.

Nina looked at her watch. ‘Four o’clock. Told you.’

Ivanov laughed.

‘Does this happen in Russia?’

‘Not in Moscow, but out in the sticks, some places, yes.’

They watched as the waiters came round with candles.

‘It’s almost romantic,’ Ivanov said, after a candle was placed on their table.

Nina smiled. He obviously couldn’t resist the urge to flirt with every woman he came across, even government ministers. No wonder he was divorced.

‘Anyway,’ said Ivanov. ‘Where was I?’

Nina took a drag on her cigarette. ‘Bogmaperdi.’

‘Ah yes. The sanatorium we stayed at, it was really great. But there was one thing that was weird. In the restaurant, there were three waiters who never did any work. I mean never. They didn’t even pretend to work. They just sat at a table near the kitchen. Sometimes they played cards but mostly they just seemed to amuse themselves by making fun of the other waiters.’

Nina knew exactly what Ivanov was talking about but she let him continue. He was obviously enjoying himself.

‘We used to say those three waiters were actually ghosts and we were the only people who could see them. The restaurant manager certainly looked right through them. The other waiters, most of them were the same. It was as if they couldn’t see them at all. They never looked at them and they never spoke to them or answered them back.

‘But there was one waiter who was different. He let them know exactly what he thought of them, especially the biggest one, who seemed to dominate the other two. This waiter and the big guy, they hissed something at each other almost every time they were within earshot. I had no idea what they were saying because we couldn’t hear, and in any case, it was all in Ksord-Akhtarian. But I don’t think they were declaring their love for each other, let’s put it that way.’

‘I think I can guess who you’re talking about,’ said Nina.



‘Our mutual friend. Anyway, one night soon after we arrived, me and Natasha, now my ex, we bumped into the waiters in a bar. The nice waiters. We asked them why these three never did any work. I suppose you know the story.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you know who the big guy was?’

Nina nodded. She wondered how much Ivanov knew. He seemed to be leading her very gently. She would have to be careful. She had very good reason to be wary of the person they were talking about.

‘Aleksander Mingrelsky’s son.’

‘Right first time,’ said Ivanov. ‘Except these days he’s probably more famous than his father.’

‘Famous or infamous?’

Ivanov laughed. ‘Anyway, that night in the bar, Ruslan got really pissed and he started going on about his parents and how badly they’d been treated. His papa got locked up in the Stalin era, didn’t he?’

‘Yes. He got eight years for slagging off the local Party bigwigs. Ruslan always felt bitter about that.’

‘Too right he did. Well Ruslan was in full flow about how much he hated the Party, I remember that. Tamara, his girlfriend, obviously his wife now, I could see she was panicking. “How do I get this guy to shut up?” It was actually quite funny. Have you met Tamara?’

Nina was surprised. She hadn’t expected to be asked that. What was this Russian up to? She put out her cigarette before she answered.

‘Yes, I have, actually. Just once, a couple of months ago. There was a big reception for Ruslan after he won another one of his medals. I only got to say hello. I didn’t get a chance to speak to either of them after that.’

‘What did you think of her?’

Another question Nina hadn’t been expecting. What could she say? That she was delighted he had found someone? Or that a tiny

part of her was disappointed he wouldn't spend the rest of his life pining for her?

'She seemed very nice.'

'She is,' said Ivanov. 'You'd like her.'

Nina guessed that she probably would, but she doubted very much that they would ever become close friends. It would be a bit awkward. In any case, she was three thousand kilometres away in England.

'Anyway,' said Ivanov. 'I suppose you know what happened a few days later.'

'They got in a fight.'

'Too right they did. Bloody hell, you should have seen them the next morning. Ruslan looked like he'd gone fifteen rounds and most of the other waiters were nearly as bad. Tamara told us what had happened. She'd been punched in the face too.'

'Anyway, that was supposed to be our last full day at the sanatorium. We went on a day trip somewhere or other, and in the evening, the waiters were all gone, replaced by people we'd never seen before. We asked where they were, and it turned out they'd all been arrested. Mingrelsky senior was in town and he was after blood.'

'That's when we realised Ruslan and the others really were in trouble. I mean, these were good kids, we could see that. And Mingrelsky junior? What a bastard. So we decided to try and help them out. We decided me and Natasha would stay in Bogmaperdi for a few more days while the rest flew back to Moscow and tried to kick up a stink there.'

Nina was curious to learn more. Ruslan had never mentioned anything about Moscow.

Ivanov continued: 'We were all pretty naïve, it has to be said. We thought all we had to do was tell the editors and they'd agree with us and threaten to publish. No such luck. There was no way they were going to risk trouble with the authorities over a bunch of waiters. Then we got a massive stroke of luck. One senior editor offered to help. He knew Aleksander Mingrelsky and he fucking hated him.'

Ivanov sat back, a big grin on his face.

‘How come?’

‘His sister was married to somebody really big in the Party down here: the General Secretary himself.’

‘Comrade Zikladza?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah yes, Zikladza’s wife is Russian.’

‘Anyway, our senior editor, he was called Tolya, he told my friends back in Moscow that him and his wife had come down to Ksordia-Akhtaria for a holiday. And there they encountered Aleksander Mingrelsky, who tried to seduce his wife. My friends said the way Tolya hated Mingrelsky, they think he probably succeeded.’

Ivanov and Nina both laughed. Nina had only ever seen Aleksander Mingrelsky on TV, but she remembered him as a charismatic figure, ruggedly handsome, with a deep, seductive voice and an almost aristocratic bearing. She could imagine how a certain kind of woman might succumb to his charms, maybe someone worried about her fading looks and flattered to receive the attention of such an illustrious figure.

‘So Tolya phoned up his sister and said, “Hey, you’ve got to stop this. My editors are a bunch of lunatics and if these waiters get charged, they’ll publish.”’

‘Ruslan said you negotiated a deal with Mingrelsky.’

‘Not really,’ said Ivanov. ‘Tolya and Comrade Zikladza did the heavy lifting. We never even met Mingrelsky. The only person we spoke with was Tengiz Alavidza.’

‘Him? I didn’t know he was involved.’

‘Yes.’

‘Not a very nice man.’

‘No,’ said Ivanov. ‘Most definitely not.’

Alavidza was a former KGB officer rumoured to have strong ties with organised crime and nationalist extremists. He had attached himself to the supposedly reformist wing of the Communist Party, who Nina regarded as no better than the hardliners. He now controlled the police and the KGB in East Ksordia. Nina considered him to be one of the most dangerous people in the whole Republic.

‘Anyway,’ Ivanov continued, ‘me and Natasha met Alavidza in the afternoon and he said he would try to persuade Mingrelsky senior to drop it. I’m pretty sure Comrade Zikladza had already given Mingrelsky his orders. Our negotiations were a bit of a charade, really.’

‘We arranged to speak again the following morning to tie everything up. But this time, it was serious. Alavidza’s attitude had completely changed. He said the others could go, but Mingrelsky wanted Ruslan locked up. We got the impression it was Alavidza that had turned against Ruslan, not Mingrelsky senior.’

‘Do you know why?’

‘I assume he had found out about Ruslan’s...I don’t know, shall we say, “attitudes”.’

Nina shook her head. ‘I think there’s another explanation. A KGB officer tried to recruit Ruslan as an informant. Obviously, that must have been Alavidza. Ruslan told him to fuck off, in so many words, with some added abuse for good measure.’

Ivanov laughed. ‘That explains it. Alavidza really dug his heels in and we were in a quandary. I mean, we were totally bluffing and maybe it was better to save the others rather than risk getting everyone sent down. We couldn’t even phone Tolya to ask for support because we were scared somebody would listen in and find us out. In the end, we steeled ourselves and said, “Look, tell Comrade Mingrelsky he has to let all of them go or we’ll publish.” And the rest you know.’

‘So Ruslan and his friends were very lucky to get away with it.’

‘You bet. Very lucky.’

‘But he made a couple of enemies on the way,’ said Nina. ‘Did you know that when we were arrested, the KGB officer from Bogmaperdi popped in to see Ruslan and gloat?’

‘Alavidza?’

‘Presumably.’

‘Wow.’

‘And Mingrelsky junior beat him up in prison.’

‘What? I hadn’t heard that.’

Nina laughed. 'Mingrelsky was transferred to the same prison not long before our trial, and he beat Ruslan up. Ruslan can be pretty infuriating sometimes. He never likes show weakness under any circumstances. He claimed they'd had a fight again and he gave as good as he got, but from what I heard, Mingrelsky and two of his cronies gave him a thrashing. You haven't heard this from me, by the way. Okay?' It occurred to Nina that she had let her guard down too much.

'Don't worry,' said Ivanov. 'I haven't come here in search of a scoop. Maybe I can tell you something you don't know. Remember when Ruslan broke his leg? Alavidza was behind that.'

'Really? I knew it was the KGB but I didn't know he was involved.'

'He was,' said Ivanov. 'I heard this quite recently, from someone quite high up in the military. The KGB didn't do it themselves. Alavidza contracted it out to our friend Mingrelsky junior.'

This news struck Nina like a blow to the gut because she knew at least one other beating that the KGB had contracted out to Mingrelsky. She hesitated to mention it but suspected that Ivanov already knew. That was probably why he had wanted to interview her in the first place.

'I know of one other person who Mingrelsky beat up on the orders of the KGB.'

'Who's that?'

'We're off the record, right?'

'Completely off the record.'

'You don't even say, "A senior democrat source said..." or anything like that.'

'You have my word.'

'Promise?'

'I promise.'

4.

NINA SHUDDERED as the memory came back to her. It had happened in the spring of 1989, just four months after her release from prison. It had been a long day, ending with a public meeting in

the centre of Khosume. Afterwards, Nina and three of her closest colleagues adjourned to a bar, where she drank a small glass of beer before driving two of them home and then heading for her apartment in the northern suburbs.

She parked some 30 metres from her building and was almost there when, out of nowhere, masked men jumped her and grabbed her. She screamed and one of them punched her hard in the stomach. As she doubled over, they put a sack over her head.

They held her in a headlock and dealt her several more blows to her stomach and her flank.

‘Squeal and we’ll fucking hit you again.’

She tried to shout for help and they thumped her twice more.

She heard a car pull up. They threw her in. She banged her head and her ribs as she landed face down on the floor in front of the rear seats.

Two men got in the back and Nina felt their boots press down on her. One of them yanked her feet into the car and closed the door.

‘Make a sound and we’ll kick you.’

He stamped on her backside to prove his point.

The car sped off.

Nina tried to detach herself from the immediacy of her terror.

What was going on?

What did they want with her?

Were they going to kill her?

If that was the case, why was she still alive?

She guessed that they were KGB. In the Communist era, it had happened to several of her friends: the KGB had dragged them into a car, taken them to the back end of beyond and beaten them up, leaving them to make their own way home. Sometimes they even stripped them naked before abandoning them, though she had never heard of that happening to a woman.

Strangely enough, the thought that she was in for a beating was of some comfort to her.

It meant they weren’t going to kill her.

Probably.

She would survive.

Probably.

Just like she had survived all her interrogations.

All her years in prison.

And their fucking labour camps.

She had survived that.

She would survive this.

She would survive.

Probably.

The car speeded up and Nina guessed that they had reached the highway. She had no idea which direction they were going. She just wanted them to hurry up and get there.

Get it over with.

The journey was painful enough, face down on the floor of the car, head covered in a sack and a boot on the back of her head. The hump in the middle of the floor dug into her ribs.

She wriggled to try and get more comfortable.

This earned her a stamp on her legs.

‘Don’t move, slut.’

She wanted to cry but she was determined not to. There was no way she was going to give them that satisfaction.

The journey seemed to go on forever. She tried to distract herself by composing her press statement. She would make sure the police investigated, at least until the KGB told them to back off. She would have her bruises photographed. She would let the world know what these evil cockroaches were up to.

They would regret the day they decided to attack her.

She just hoped they didn’t smash her face in. ‘Please don’t let them break my nose or knock my teeth out.’

Usually they didn’t. They liked a bit of deniability.

Better not provoke them.

Don’t make them lose control.

The car slowed down and turned left. She was off the highway. The road still felt very straight, but not as smooth as the highway.

The fear ramped up.

Oh God.

It wouldn’t be long now.

‘Be brave, be brave, be brave,’ she said to herself. ‘Don’t let them see how scared you are.’

And then they were there. The car stopped, the doors opened and they got out. They pulled the sack off Nina’s head and dragged her out by her hair. For a moment, she stood looking at them, three of them, all wearing masks.

That was a relief. If they had shown their faces, she would have known they were planning to kill her.

She didn’t know what to do.

Should she try and run?

A fourth man grabbed her from behind and one of them punched her in the stomach once, twice.

This completely winded her. She couldn’t breathe at all.

They let her fall to her hands and knees. She gasped for breath.

A kick to her flank sent her flying.

Then they were all upon her, kicking and stamping on her chest, her back and her legs.

She curled into a ball and it stopped.

Had they finished?

Please let it be over.

Make it stop.

Silence.

Thank God.

She heard one of them step up to her.

‘If you see that half-dick Shanidza again, give him this.’ With that he gave her an almighty kick on the base of her spine.

She sprawled flat on her face and writhed about with the pain of it.

She could hear the others laughing.

Nina realised that she was crying.

Blood and damnation.

She hadn’t wanted to give them that pleasure.

Blood and damnation.

They were still there, she knew that. But she didn’t dare to look.

Then one of them spoke. ‘Are we going to strip her?’

Sheer terror surged through Nina’s body.



‘No,’ she heard the one who had just kicked her say. ‘Looking at this scrawny slut might put us off sex for life.’

The others laughed again.

She closed her eyes with relief.

Then she braced herself as she heard him step up to her once more. This time, he grabbed her hair. ‘You know why we did this, right? Well let this be a warning to you. If not, you’ll be hearing from us again.’

Nina closed her eyes again, anticipating one last kick, but it never came. Instead she heard footsteps and car doors slamming shut. The engine started and they were gone.

She had survived.

Thank God she was still alive.

And they hadn’t smashed her face in, thank God.

She lay on the ground for several minutes, hugging her wounded torso and crying.

She was shaking violently. She didn’t know if it was the cold or the fear.

She had never known such pain or such utter humiliation.

It occurred to her that she might die if she didn’t move. What if she had internal bleeding?

She raised her head. She was just a few metres from the road. There couldn’t be much traffic, otherwise they wouldn’t have chosen a spot so near the road to beat her up. She would have to walk until she found a house or a main road. She had no idea which direction to go in, or if she was capable of walking that far.

She struggled to her feet. The greatest pain was in her coccyx and her ribs, on the left. Every breath hurt. Her upper arms were obviously bruised, as were both legs, and her face stung where she had grazed it on the surface of the road. She tried to take a step and almost fell over. She sank back to her hands and knees.

For several minutes she didn’t move. She just stayed her hands and knees and cried.

‘Oh, God’s nails, Nina. Get a grip.’

She wiped her tears and her snotty nose with her shaking fingers and then stood up again and hobbled to the road.

Which way to go? She peered into the darkness. The countryside was flat and she thought she could make out headlights in the distance.

But could she walk that far?

‘Yes, you can,’ she told herself. ‘Because it’s not as if you’ve got any fucking choice.’

And so she set off. Her right leg wasn’t too bad, but her left leg could hardly move and couldn’t bear her weight for more than a split second. She took just a dozen steps before she had to rest on her hands and knees by the side of the road.

By now terror had given way to anger. She would get those sons of sluts. She would make them pay for what they had done to her. Every newspaper in the republic and beyond would put her on the front page. She would weaponise her bruises. She would show the KGB for evil cockroaches they were.

Her rage helped to dull the pain as she slowly made her way towards the main road.

She also knew that she had no choice but to use this beating against them. It was the only way to make sure they didn’t come back and do it again. It was either that or give up, and there was no way she would do that. Not after everything she had been through.

As she pressed on, she found that she could go further without a rest. Her head was also beginning to clear. What was all that about Ruslan? He kicked her once for him.

Did he really say that, or had she imagined it?

Yes, she was pretty sure he had said that.

But why?

Nina got her wish. There were pictures of her grazed cheek and her bruises in every newspaper, a string of interviews and even a mention on TV and radio. Where she had been one of several democrat leaders in Ksordia-Akhtaria, the attack on her made her the most prominent. If its purpose had been to intimidate her and remove her from the scene, it had backfired quite spectacularly. She sometimes joked to herself that it had been a good career move.

Physically, it took more than three months to recover. Two cracked ribs and dozens of bruises kept her in hospital for two nights and made movement difficult for weeks afterward. But she pushed herself hard. She wanted to show them that she was a fighter. She wasn't scared of them.

Except she was. The fear of another beating continued to haunt her. She no longer dared to walk alone in the dark. Two muscular activists drove her to and from every evening engagement. Until her 'partner' moved in six months ago, her activists would check her apartment was empty when she got home and stand by her door until she had secured it with four separate locks.

As soon as she put her head on her pillow at night, the flashbacks would begin. It would be a year before she could expect to get to sleep before two in the morning. Even now, two and a half years later, she would wake with nightmares about the attack two or three times a week.

She didn't tell the press how the leader of her assailants had kicked her once for Ruslan, though she did tell a number of friends and close colleagues. Nobody could understand it. As far as they knew, Ruslan wasn't in touch with any of the anti-Communist parties. Everyone knew that he had been her lover, but they also knew that he had publicly denounced her.

A year after the attack, Moscow ordered free elections to the Ksord-Akhtarian Supreme Soviet. Nina's democrat bloc won almost 10% of the vote and she found herself leader of a small but significant group of deputies. The assembly was dominated by the so-called 'reformist' Communists and by nationalists of every possible description, among them two deputies from the Party of Ksordian Unity, an openly fascist organisation with its own private army drawn from the ranks of organised crime and the Red Star Ronkoni ultras.

The Party of Ksordian Unity's leader was none other than Aleksander Mingrelsky's son Vakhtan. He showed zero interest in the Supreme Soviet. It was said that his main motivation for getting elected was the immunity from arrest that it would bestow.

He didn't deign to show his face until six weeks after the Supreme Soviet opened, when he turned up for a debate on the red and yellow diamond flag that the Akhtarian regional government had just chosen as its emblem. Most Ksords regarded this as a Rebel symbol that harked back to the massacres of the Great Patriotic War. They saw its selection as a provocation. Mingrelsky obviously couldn't resist the publicity that a rabble-rousing speech in the Supreme Soviet would generate.

As soon as he opened his mouth, Nina recognised him as the leader of the gang that had attacked her. She fled the chamber in horror and ran to the ladies' toilets where, for the first time in her life, she suffered a panic attack.

After a few minutes, one of her colleagues came to find her.

'Nina, are you okay? You're due to speak in a few minutes.'

Nina wiped the tears from her eyes and took a deep breath. 'That guy who's speaking, Vakhtan Mingrelsky, he's the one who beat me up.'

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely sure. I recognised his voice.'

'God's nails. You should tell the police.'

'There's no point. They can't touch him. Don't tell anyone. Not yet, anyway.'

'Shall I get someone else to speak for you?'

'No, I have to do it. I have to face up to the son of a slut. Just give me a couple of minutes.'

5.

AT THAT moment, the power returned and the lights in the café came back on. Nina looked at her watch. 'Less than fifteen minutes. It's usually half an hour or more.'

'So who was the other person Mingrelsky junior beat up?'

'Me.'

'Oh no. Sorry, I didn't realise.'

Nina thought Ivanov looked genuinely embarrassed. She was unsure how much she wanted to share with him and was beginning

to regret that she had told him. It looked like he hadn't known anything until she opened her big mouth.

'It was a pretty unpleasant experience,' she said after a moment. 'Something the KGB liked to do back in those days. They grabbed me one night, drove me out to the countryside, beat me up and left me there.'

'Were you badly hurt?'

'Yes, two broken ribs.'

'Jesus. That's awful. You must have been terrified.'

'You could say that.'

'And it was definitely Mingrelsky?'

'Yes. I didn't realise it at the time, but when I heard his voice months later, I knew it was him. I'd always assumed it was KGB, but when I found out it was Mingrelsky, I thought maybe there was a personal element in it.'

'How's that?'

'When they'd finished, he gave me one more kick. I don't know how you say it in Russian. Do you say coccyx?'

'You mean *kopchik*? The base of your spine?'

'Yes, that's where he kicked me. Bloody hell it hurt. Jesus. He said that was for Ruslan Shanidza.'

She looked at Ivanov. She had said much more than she intended to. He was one seductive son of a slut. No wonder he was such an effective reporter.

'This is all off the record.'

'Yes, of course. Don't worry.'

'I haven't gone public with the fact that it was him.'

'Why not?'

'Because I can't prove it. And because he might sue me for libel and I just don't have time for that.'

'Well don't worry,' said Ivanov. 'This is strictly off the record.'

'Thank you.'

After a moment, he said, 'Your friend Ruslan, he's got some pretty dangerous enemies, hasn't he?'

Nina laughed. 'So have I.'

‘Yes, you have. Sorry, I didn’t mean to minimise the risks you’ve been taking for the last ten years.’

‘I’m glad to hear it.’

‘But for you it’s not personal, is it? It’s just business, so to speak. In Ruslan’s case, it’s personal. Do you think it’s dangerous for him to come back here with bastards like Alavidza and Mingrelsky junior who hate him so much?’

Nina shook her head. ‘They’ve got more important things to worry about. It might be dangerous if he got involved in politics, but I can’t see that happening. He’s not really that political, and him and his wife have got a baby now. I’m sure they can have a much better life over there.’

Ivanov lowered his voice. ‘I’m not sure whether I should say this, but I think I will. There are those who say he burned his bridges with the democrats when he denounced you on TV. But I’ve heard a different story. I’ve heard that he worded his denunciation very carefully. He said you deserved to be locked up because you were a nationalist. But he knew you weren’t a nationalist and never have been, and he was hoping you’d spot what he said.’

How the hell did Ivanov know this? Nina had only ever told two of her closest and most trusted friends. She had sworn them to secrecy and they understood why.

She would never forget the day her KGB interrogators had gleefully shown her a video of Ruslan’s denunciation. It had been all she could do to keep her composure and not burst into tears there and then. She managed to hold out until she was alone in her cell, when she cried as she hadn’t cried since she was a little girl.

How could he betray her like that? How could he denounce her by name and say she deserved everything she got? And he even lied about her, the son of a slut. He called her a fucking nationalist. She was nothing of the sort. She hated nationalism. He knew that.

Why did he say that? Why?

How could he do that to her?

It wasn’t until days later that she twigged. It was a signal to her. Yes, of course, it had to be. He wanted to show her he was still

fighting, still resisting as much as he could. That was the only explanation.

Months later, during her trial, Nina had mentioned Ruslan in a meeting with her co-defendants and their lawyer. One of her comrades turned on her: 'I don't know why you still think so highly of him. He's gone over to their side now.'

Her lawyer came to his defence and told them how the KGB had broken his leg in an effort to stop him running. He said Ruslan had little choice: if he hadn't denounced her, they would have come back for him, except next time they would make damn sure he never walked again, never mind ran.

Nina cried again when she heard this. She felt her love for him wash over her. Not only was he still resisting, but he was doing so in the face of real physical danger.

But she had to make sure the KGB never found out about his signal to her. She didn't even dare to tell her lawyer or her co-defendants. It had to be an absolute secret. Nobody could know. Two of her co-defendants were her closest friends and had also been friends of Ruslan's. But she wouldn't even tell them until after they were released, and that wouldn't be for a very long time.

Five months later, the guards at her labour camp also tried to use Ruslan against her. They showed her a picture of him with his bride, but this time they failed. She felt only the slightest tinge of regret. Her love for Ruslan was of a different kind now. She thought of him as the dearest of friends and was happy for him.

Nina looked at Ivanov. He was waiting to see how she would respond to what he said.

'We're still of the record?'

'One hundred percent.'

'In that case I will reply with a short statement.'

'Yes?'

'No comment.'

Ivanov burst out laughing.

'Ask me again when the Communists no longer control Soviet sport.'

‘No need,’ said Ivanov. Shall I tell you how I know?’

‘How?’

‘I’ve got a friend in London. He’s a correspondent for the First Channel. He knows Ruslan quite well. Personally, not professionally.’

‘Really? So how is Ruslan?’

‘He’s very well. He has his Candidate of Science degree, or whatever they call it in England, and he’s just started a new job at a university. And he’s enjoying being a father.’

‘That’s good.’

‘My friend says Ruslan’s very tuned in to politics over here. He doesn’t like the reformist Communists at all. He thinks they’re just as bad as the other lot and twice as dangerous.’

‘He’s right there,’ said Nina. ‘I don’t mind being quoted on that.’

‘Ruslan’s really worried. He says that if the Soviet Union collapses, which, let’s face it, is fucking happening all around us, Ruslan says Ksordia-Akhtaria won’t survive as an independent country. It’ll fall apart and there’s a very big danger of civil war between the Ksords and the Akhtarians.’

Nina nodded. ‘That’s not an unreasonable analysis.’

‘Apparently he’s wondering whether he should come back and get involved. He feels guilty to be all comfortable over there when everything’s falling to pieces here. My friend isn’t allowed to tell his wife what Ruslan says, in case she tells Tamara. Ruslan hasn’t discussed any of this with her yet.’

Nina’s heart had skipped a beat at the idea of him returning. Not so much the thought of seeing him again, more the possibility of having him as an ally. He would certainly make a big splash, no doubt about that. But Ivanov was right. Ruslan had some very dangerous enemies who wouldn’t be happy to see him back. They wouldn’t be happy at all.



# A Long Night of Chaos

The second Ruslan Shanidza novel.

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