

Waltz in Syncopated Time

Part 7

"Amanda . . ." Sophie looked at Amanda over the rim of her teacup. "Did you read any fairy tales when you were learning Russian?"

The non sequitur caught Amanda off guard, and she paused a moment, thinking. "Just a few," she finally answered. "I think I remember one about a cat and a fox - Lizaveta, or something like that - and another about the snow maiden."

"Snyegurochka," Sophie answered with a wistful smile. "Of course," she continued, "but have you read the Soviet version of the goose that laid the golden egg?"

"No . . ." Amanda narrowed her eyes in thought. "I don't think I have."

Setting her teacup down, Sophie sat back and began to narrate, "Once upon a time there was an old man and an old woman, and they had a speckled hen . . ."

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"So they were happier with the plain egg than the golden one?" Amanda's brow furrowed as she attempted to understand the moral of the story.

Sophie nodded. "The plain egg was useful; the golden one was not." She continued, "That is the difference between the Communist and Capitalist philosophies. The Communists are looking out for the good of all, and their plain egg suits a purpose - food. They have no use for the golden egg - no use for money. The gold egg does nothing but take up space."

"But the Capitalists, on the other hand," Amanda broke in, beginning to follow the tack Sophie was taking. "Would see the golden egg as a rarity, something of value."

"Right . . ." the old woman smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners, and nodded. "Capitalists are looking out for themselves and believe that every individual can ultimately become a millionaire - personal achievement is most valued."

Amanda nodded at the over-simplistic explanation and waited for the old woman to reach her conclusion. She finally did. "They're right of course - Communism will fail. No one is really interested in the sacrificing in the name of equality. They all want the edge - the leg up."

She stood and walked to the stove, refilling her teacup. "I was Winkel's paramour." She saw Amanda's unsuccessful attempt to hide her surprise, and added, "A long time ago. We met in East Germany right after the wall went up. I was younger - and beautiful - and completely devoted to the cause. The collective ideal appealed to me - I did not understand people as I do now."

She sighed as she sat. "Things have changed, of course. I am growing tired of playing games. Peter Winkel was never as good a lover as he was a manipulator."

"You're turning on him," Amanda stated, barely surprised.

"I've been working with the underground for about a year now - Winkel does not suspect." She cleared the cups as she spoke. Then, turning from the sink to look at Amanda pointedly, she ordered, "Tell me how you wound up in Winkel's web."

"It's a long story, too," Amanda began with a touch of a wistful smile. "About a thirty-five percent chance of rain, a package, and forty men in red hats. . ."

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"So that is your weakness," Sophie observed as Amanda's tale came to a close. "Your partner." She glanced out the dingy window, noting the sun sinking below the utilitarian apartment buildings. "We should eat supper. There is a restaurant a few blocks from here. Shall we go?"

Amanda nodded, not certain she would ever understand the inscrutable woman but growing more sure that her time in this equally enigmatic city would eventually set her free.

The walk to the restaurant was quiet, and Amanda took the time to study her surroundings more closely. Like Sophie, the city's character was one full of contrasts, - colorful Ottoman inspired buildings set against utilitarian Soviet style structures; people lined up to buy onions while a potato vendor went virtually ignored.

"This way." Sophie ushered Amanda through the gilt-trimmed doors and into the lobby of an opulently decorated hotel, and then, rounding a corner, into a plush restaurant. Again, Amanda's mind struggled to wrap itself around the disparities this city presented.

Sophie spoke brusquely to the tuxedoed maître d', and he showed them to a secluded table in the back corner of the dining room. Handing them each their menu, and filling their water glasses, he then swiftly and unobtrusively disappeared.

"Are you hungry?" Sophie asked, watching Amanda and scanning the menu at the same time. "I am," she answered her own question, and then, with a touch of self-deprecating humor patted her ample mid-section and added, "though I suppose it wouldn't hurt me to miss a meal now and then."

Amanda studied the menu, unable to decipher a word of the Czech, and decided simply to order whatever Sophie did.

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Lee's legs ached from running and he felt a cramp developing in his side as he rounded yet another corner hot on the heels of the boy he'd tackled earlier that day in his hotel room.

He saw the young man steal another glance at him over his shoulder, and cursed when the teen sped up in response. Taking a deep shuddering breath, he forced himself to sprint even faster until at last, he'd closed the gap, and with a leap, tackled the young Austrian.

"This is getting old," Lee growled in greeting. "Why were you running?"

"You were chasing me!" he whimpered in protest. "I did not know what to do."

Lee glared down at him, his fist clenched and drawn back. "You were running long before you saw me. What happened at the hotel?"

"I was scared. I do not like all the questions. Please . . . do not hurt me."

Lee forced his fist to relax and grabbed the boy by the collar, hauling him roughly to his feet. "Come with me."

"Where do we go?" Hermann asked.

"Wherever I decide," Lee answered, not entirely sure himself.

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"Why don't you look at the wine list?" Sophie suggested after Amanda had set down her menu.

Amanda declined, "I don't think so. I'm not really a drinker, and besides, I can't really read Czech."

"Just give it a try," the woman pressed. "You might be surprised."

Realizing this was not an argument she was going to win, she accepted the offered folder, and opened it. The arrangement of familiar letters, in entirely unfamiliar patterns frustrated her, and she shook her head, setting the folder down.

"Look again," Sophie insisted, and Amanda complied.

On closer inspection, she saw what the old woman was referring to. Through the thin vellum of the wine list she could see another sheet. Setting the folder discretely in her lap, Amanda pulled the page out - a long list of five letter sequences.

"How . . . ? Why . . . ? What . . . ?" Her eyes wide with confusion, she began to ask incomplete, multi-faceted questions as she folded the sheet in quarters and slipped it into her purse.

"Not now," Sophie answered, her brown eyes darkening even further. "Here comes the waiter. By the way," she added, "I recommend the broiled cod and potatoes."

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The raucous music and flashing fluorescent lights heralded their arrival at the Prater amusement park before they reached the gates. He quickly paid the admission and headed in the direction of the Riesenrad - the giant landmark Ferris wheel at the center of the park - all the while dragging a mutely confused Hermann behind him.

"Get on," Lee held the door to the cabin open and waited for Hermann to step inside.

Following him, he handed the ride operator a thousand schilling note. "Thank you. Wait for my signal, please."

The cart began to ascend, and soon Lee and Hermann found themselves high above the city, perched at the top of the giant Ferris wheel. "Now," Lee commented, looking pointedly at the miniature cityscape. "I don't think you'll be so likely to run."

"Der Riesenrad," Hermann muttered, shaking his head. "Ich kann es nicht glauben."

"Believe it," Lee countered. "And then tell me where Amanda is."

"I do not know . . ." He shook his head and backed against the wall of the cabin.

"Let's try again." Lee took a step closer and lifted the young man by the shoulders holding him threateningly close to the edge of the window. Speaking with a deliberate calm, he repeated, "Where . . . is . . . she?"

Hermann's face paled. The white was a stark contrast to the red of the Ferris wheel car and the glowing orange of the setting sun. "I do not know," he reiterated his protest, his voice a strangled whisper. "Winkel did not tell me."

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"What am I supposed to do with this?" Amanda pulled the sheet of paper out of her purse after the two women had returned to Sophie's loft. Skimming it again, she shook her head. "What's it say?"

"It's a list of East German agents operating in America," Sophie answered nonchalantly. "The cipher is one Winkel developed." She pushed a concealed button on her coffee table revealing a small, spring-loaded drawer. From it, she withdrew another sheet of paper. "We spent a long time trying to crack it."

She handed the page to Amanda, then turned to walk away. "Good night," she spoke over her shoulder. "The couch pulls out; there are blankets in the corner; let me know what you find in the list."

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"Where can I find Winkel?" Lee relaxed his hold on Hermann long enough for the young man to take a deep breath,

but the boy remained silent, shaking his head defiantly.

"Where . . . is . . . she?" Lee pressed, tightening his grip on the teen's collar, and again pushing his upper body dangerously through the window's opening.

"Okay, I tell you." Hermann struggled against Lee's grip, trying to keep inside the car as much as possible. "He has an office in the Bundesbank building - off of Universitätsstrasse."

Lee nodded slowly in understanding. "Off of Universitätsstrasse . . . good." He let go of Hermann, and leaned out the window to holler, "Okay, let us down."

Turning, he saw that the young man had fainted.

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"Tony Marshall, Department of Energy; Harry Lipsitt, Naval Postgraduate School; Jimmie Oxford, FAA . . ." Amanda read from the list of names she'd translated - row after row of them, people in positions of authority within the US Government, and each, from what Sophie told her, an East German operative.

END PART VII

**The Riesenrad is a 100-year-old, 210 foot high, Ferris Wheel in Prater - an historic amusement park in Vienna. For more information (unfortunately only in German, but nice pictures) you can visit here <http://www.wienerriesenrad.com/fs.html>

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