

BRUCE STERLING

THE LITTLEST JACKAL

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When Bruce Sterling called me last year to say he could no longer do a science column on a regular basis, I begged him to continue. I pleaded with him. (Remember, we mentioned the art of editorial begging in a previous issue.) When it became clear that I could not change his mind, I asked that he send us an occasional short story.

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"The Littlest Jackal" is not an occasional short story. It is a strong novella, bringing Bruce's continuing character, Leggy Starlitz, back to our pages.

I hate sibelius," said the Russian mafioso.

"It's that Finnish nationalist thing," said Leggy Starlitz.

"That's why I hate Sibelius." The Russian's name was Pulat R. Khoklov. He'd once been a KGB liaison officer to the air force of the Afghan government. Like many Afghan War veterans, Khoklov had gone into organized crime since the Soviet crackup.

Starlitz examined the Sibelius CD's print-job and plastic hinges with a dealer's professional eye. "Europeans sure pretend to like this classic stuff," he said. "Almost like pop, but it can't move real product." He placed the CD back in the rack. The outdoor market table was nicely set with cunningly targeted tourist-bait. Starlitz glanced over the glass earrings and the wooden jewelry, then closely examined a set of lewd postcards.

"This isn't 'Europe,'" Khoklov sniffed. "This is a Czarist Grand Duchy with bourgeois pretensions."

Starlitz fingered a poly-cotton souvenir jersey with comical red-nosed reindeer. It bore an elaborate legend in the Finno-Ugric tongue, a language infested with umlauts. "This is Finland, ace. It's European Union."

Khoklov was kitted-out to the nines in a three-piece linen suit and a snappy straw boater. Life in the New Russia had been very good to Khoklov. "At least Finland's not NATO."

"Look, fuckin' Poland is NATO now. Get over it."

They moved on to another table, manned by a comely Finn in a flowered summer frock and icily shoes. Starlitz tried on a pair of shades from a revolving stand. He gazed experimentally about the marketplace. Potatoes. Dill. Carrots and onions. Buckets of strawberries. Flowers and flags. Orange fabric canopies over wooden market tables run by Turks and gypsies. People were selling salmon straight from the decks of funky little fishing boats.

Khoklov sighed. "Lekhi, you have no historical perspective." He plucked a Dunhill from a square red pack.

One of Khoklov's two bodyguards appeared at once, alertly flicking a Zippo. "No proper sense of culture," insisted Khoklov, breathing smoke and coughing richly. The guard tucked the lighter into his Chicago Bulls jacket and padded off silently on his spotless Adidas.

Starlitz, who was trying to quit, hummed a smoke from Khoklov, which he was forced to light for himself. Then he paid for the shades, peeling a salmon-colored fifty from a dense wad of Finnish marks.

Khoklov paused nostalgically by the Czarina's Obelisk, a bellicose monument festooned with Romanov aristo-fetish gear in cast bronze. Khoklov, whose politics shaded toward Pamyat rightism with a mystical pan-Slavic spin, patted the granite base of the Obelisk with open pleasure.

Then he gazed across the Esplanadi. "Helsinki city hall?"

Starlitz adjusted his shades. When arranging his end of the deal from a cellar in Tokyo, he hadn't quite gathered that Finland would be so relentlessly bright. "That's the city hall all right."

Khoklov turned to examine the sun-spattered Baltic. "Think you could hit that building from a passing boat?"

"You mean me personally? Forget it."

"I mean someone in a hired speedboat with a shoulder-launched surplus Red Army panzerfaust. Generically speaking."

"Anything's possible nowadays."

"At night," urged Khoklov. "A pre-dawn urban commando raid! Cleverly planned. Precisely executed. Ruthless operational accuracy!"

"This is summer in Finland," said Starlitz. "The sun's not gonna set here for a couple of months."

Khoklov, tripped up in the midst of his reverie, frowned. "No matter. You weren't the agent I had in mind in any case."

They wandered on. A Finn at a nearby table was selling big swollen muskrat-fur hats. No sane local would buy these items, for they were the exact sort of pseudo-authentic cultural relics that appeared only in tourist economies. The Finn, however, was flourishing. He was deftly slotting and whipping the Mastercards and Visas of sunburnt Danes and Germans through a handheld cellular credit checker.

"Our man arrives tomorrow morning on the Copenhagenferry," Khoklov announced.

"You ever met this character before?" Starlitz said. "Ever done any real business with him?"

Khoklov sidled along, flicking the smoldering butt of his Dunhill onto the gray stone cobbles. "I've never met him myself. My boss knew him in the seventies. My boss used to run him from the KGB HQ in East Berlin. They called him Raf, back then. Raf the Jackal."

Starlitz scratched his close-cropped, pumpkin-like head. "I've heard of Carlos the Jackal."

"No, no," Khoklov said, pained. "Carlos retired, he's in Khartoum. This is Raf. A different man entirely."

"Where's he from?"

"Argentina. Or Italy. He once ran arms between the Tupamaros and the Red Brigades. We think he was an Italian Argentine originally."

"KGB recruited him and you didn't even know his nationality?" Khoklov frowned. "We never recruited him! KGB never had to recruit any of those Seventies people! Baader-Meinhoff, Palestinians. . . They always came straight to us!" He sighed wistfully. "American Weather Underground --how I wanted to meet a groovy hippie revolutionary from Weather Underground! But even when they were blowing up the Bank of America the Yankees would never talk to real communists."

"The old boy must be getting on in years."

"No no. He's very much alive, and very charming. The truly dangerous are always very charming. It's how they survive."

"I like surviving" Starlitz said thoughtfully.

"Then you can learn a few much-needed lessons in charm, Lekhi. Since you're our liaison."

Raf the Jackal arrived from across the Baltic in a sealed Fiat. It was a yellow two-door with Danish plates. His driver was a Finnish girl, maybe twenty. Her dyed-black hair was braided with long green extensions of tattered yam. She wore a red blouse, cut-off jeans and striped cotton stockings.

Starlitz climbed into the passenger seat, slammed the door, and smiled. The girl was sweating with heat, fear, and nervous tension. She had a battery of ear-piercings. A tattooed wolf's-head was stenciled up her clavicle and nosing at the base of her neck.

Starlitz twisted and looked behind him. The urban guerrilla was scrunched into the Fiat's back seat, asleep, doped, or dead. Raf wore a denim jacket, relaxed-fit Levis and Ray-Bans. He'd taken his sneakers off and was sleeping in his rumpled mustard-yellow socks.

"How's the old man?" Starlitz said, adjusting his seat belt.

"Ferries make him seasick." The girl headed up the Esplanade. "We'll wake him at the safe-house." She shot him a quick sideways glance of kohllined eyes. "You

found a good safe-house?"

"Sure, the place should do," said Starlitz. He was pleased that her English was so good. After four years tending bar in Roppongi, the prospect of switching Japanese for Finnish was dreadful. "What do they call you?"

"What did they tell you to call me?"

"Got no instructions on that."

The girl's pale knuckles whitened on the Fiat's steering-wheel. "They didn't inform you of my role in this operation?"

"Why would they wanna do that?"

"Raf is our agent now," the girl said. "He's not your agent. Our operations coincide -- but only because our interests coincide. Raf belongs to my movement. He doesn't belong to any kind of Russians."

Starlitz twisted in his seat to stare at the slumbering terrorist. He envied the guy's deep sense of peace. It was hard to tell through the Ray-Bans, but the smear of sweat on his balding forehead gave Raf a look of unfeigned ease.

Starlitz pondered the girl's latest remark. He had no idea why a college-age female Finn would claim to be commanding a 51-year-old veteran urban guerrilla.

"Why do you say that?" he said at last. This was usually a safe and useful question.

The girl glanced in the rear-view. They were passing a sunstruck green park, with bronze statues of swaggering Finnish poets and mood-stricken Finnish dramatists. She took a corner with a squeak of tires. "Since you need a name, call me Aino."

"Okay. I'm Leggy. . . . Or Lekhi. . . . Or Keggae." He'd been getting a lot of "Reggae" lately. "The safe-house is in Ypsallina. You know that neighborhood?" Starlitz plucked a laminated tourist map from his shirt pocket. "Take Mannerheimintie up past the railway station."

"You're not Russian," Aino concluded.

"Nyet."

"Are you Organizatsiya?"

"I forget what you have to do to officially join the Russian mafia, but basically, no."

"Why are you involved in the Alands operation? You don't look political."

Leggy found the lever beneath the passenger seat and leaned back a little, careful not to jostle the slumbering terrorist. "You're sure you want to hear about that?"

"Of course I want to hear. Since we are working together."

"Okay. Have it your way. It's like this," Starlitz said. "I've been in Tokyo working for an all-girl Japanese metal band. These girls made it pretty big and they bought this disco downtown in Roppongi. I was managing the place. . . . Besides the headbanging, these metal-chicks ran another racket on the side. Memorabilia. A target-market teenage-kid thing. Fanmags, keychains, T-shirts, CD-ROMs. . . . Lotta money there!"

Aino stopped at a traffic light. The cobbled crosswalk filled with a pedestrian mass of sweating, sun-dazed Finns.

"Anyway, after I developed that teen market, I found this other thing. These cute little animals. 'Froofies.' Major hit in Japan. Froofy velcro shoes, Froofy candy, sodas, backpacks, badges, lunchkits . . . Froofies are what they call 'kawai.'"

Aino drove on. They passed a bronze Finnish general on horseback. He had been a defeated general, but he looked like defeating him again would be far more trouble than it was worth. "What's kawai?"

Starlitz robbed his stubbled chin. "'Cute' doesn't get it across. Maybe 'adorable.' Big-money-making adorable. The kicker is that Froofies come from Finland."

"I'm a Finn. I don't know anything called Froofies."

"They're kids' books. This little old Finnish lady wrote them. On her kitchen table. Illustrated kid-stories from the Forties and Fifties. Of course lately they've been made into manga and anime and Nintendo cassettes and a whole bunch of other stuff. . . ."

Aino's brows rose. "Do you mean Fluuvins? Little blue animals with heads like big fat pillows?"

"Oh, you know them, then."

"My mother read me Fluuvins! Why would Japanese want Fluuvins?"

"Well, the scam was -- this old lady, she lives on this secluded island. Middle of the Baltic. Complete ass-end of nowhere. Old girl never married. No manager. No agent. Obviously not getting a dime off all this major Japanese action. Probably senile. So the plan is -- I fly over to Finland. To these islands. Hunt her down. Cut a deal with her. Get her signature. Then, we sue."

"I don't understand you."

"She lives in the Aland Islands. Those islands are crucial to your people, and the Organizatsiya too. So you see the general convergence of interests here?"

Aino shook her green-braided head. "We have serious political and economic interests in the Alands. Fluuvins are silly books for children."

"What's 'serious?' I'm talking plastic action figures! Cartoon drinking glasses. Kid-show theme songs. When a thing like this hits, it's major revenue. Factories churning round the clock in Shenzhen. Crates full of stuff into mall anchor-stores. Did you know that the 'California Raisins' are worth more than the entire California raisin crop? That's a true fact!"

Aino was growing gloomy. "I hate raisins. Californians use slave ethnic labor and pesticides. Raisins are nasty little dead grapes."

"I'm copacetic, but we're talking Japan here," Starlitz insisted. "Higher per-capita than Marin County! The ruble's in the toilet now, but the yen is sky-high. We get a big shakedown settlement in yen, we launder it in rubles, and we clear major revenue completely off the books. That's serious as cancer."

Aino lowered her voice. "I don't believe you. Why are you telling me such terrible lies? That's a very stupid cover story for an international spy!"

"You had to ask." Starlitz shrugged.

They found the safehouse in Ypsallina. It was a duplex. The other half of the duplex was occupied by a gullible Finnish yuppie couple with workaholic schedules. Starlitz produced the keys. Aino went in, checked every room and every window with paranoid care, then went back to the Fiat and woke Raf.

Raf wobbled into the apartment, found the bathroom. He vomited with gusto, then turned on the shower. Arno brought in a pair of bulging blue nylon sports bags. There was no phone service, but Khoklov's people had thoughtfully left a clone-chipped cellular on the bedroom dresser.

Starlitz, who had been in the safehouse before, retrieved his laptop from the kitchen closet. It was Japanese portable with a keyboard the length of a cricket bat, a complex mess of ASCII, kanji, katakana, hiragana and arcane function keys. It had a cellular modem.

Starlitz logged in to a Helsinki Internet service provider and checked the metal-band's Website in Tokyo. Nothing much happening there. Sachiho was doing TV tabloid shows. Hukie had gone into production. Ako was in the studio for a solo album. Sayoko was pregnant. Again.

Starlitz tried his hotlist and found a new satellite JPEG file of developments on the ground in Bosnia. Starlitz was becoming very interested in Bosnia. He hadn't been there yet, but he could feel the lure increasing steadily. The Japanese scene was basically over. Once the real-estate bubble had busted, the glitz had run out of the Tokyo street-party and now the high yen was chasing the gaijin off. But Bosnia was clearly a very coming scene for the mid-90s. Not Bosnia per se (unless you were a merc, or crazy) but the surrounding safe-areas where the arms and narco people were setting up: Slovenia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania.

Practically every entity that Starlitz found of interest was involved in the Bosnian scene. UN. USA. NATO. European Union. Russian intelligence, Russia mafia (interlocking directorates there). Germans. Turks. Greeks. Ndrangheta. Camorra.

Israelis. Saudis. Iranians. Moslem Brotherhood. An enormous gaggle of mercs. There was even a happening Serbian folk-metal scene where Serb chicks went gigging for hooting audiences of war criminals. It was cool the way the Yugoslav scene kept re-complicating. It was his kind of scene.

Raf emerged from the bathroom. He'd shaved and had caught his thinning wet hair in a ponytail clip. He wore his jeans; his waistline sagged but there was muscle in his hairy shoulders.

Raf unzipped one of the sports bags. He tunneled into a baggy black T-shirt.

Starlitz logged off.

Raf yawned. "Dramamine never works. Sorry."

"No problem, Raf."

Raf gazed around the apartment. The pupils of his dark eyes were two shrunken pinpoints. "Where's the girl?"

Starlitz shrugged. "Maybe she went out to cop some Chinese."

Raf found his shades and a packet of Gauloise. Raf might have been Italian. The accent made this seem plausible. "The boot of the car," he said. "Could you help?"

They hauled a big wrapped tarpaulin from the trunk of the Fiat and into the safe-house. Raf deftly untied the tarp and spread its contents across the chill linoleum of the kitchenette.

Rifles. Pistols. Amino. Grenades. Plastique. Fuse wire. Detonator: Startitz examined the arsenal skeptically. The hardware looked rather dated.

Raf deftly reassembled a stripped and greased AK-47. The rifle looked like it had been buried for several years, but buried by someone who knew how to bury weapons properly. Raf slotted the curved magazine and patted the tarnished wooden butt.

"Ever seen a Pancor Jackhammer?" asked Starlitz. "Modern gas-powered combat shotgun, all-plastic, bullpup design? Does four twelve-gauge rounds a second. The ammo drums double as landmines."

Raf nodded. "Yes, I do the trade shows. But you know -- as a practical matter -- you have to let people know that you can kill them."

"Yeah? Why is-that?"

"Everyone knows the classic AK silhouette. You show civilians the AK --" Raf brandished the rifle expertly -- "they throw themselves on the floor. You bring in your modern plastic auto-shotgun, they think it's a vacuum cleaner."

"I take your point."

Raf lifted a bomb-clustered khaki webbing belt. "See these pineapples? Grenades like these, they have inferior killing radius, but they truly look like grenades. What was your name again, my friend?"

"Starlitz."

"Starlet, you carry these pineapples on your belt into a bank or a hotel lobby, you will never have to use them. Because people know pineapples. Of course, when you use grenades, you don't want to use these silly things. You want these rifle-mounted BG-15s, with the rocket propellant."

Starlitz examined the scraped and greasy rifle-grenades. The cylindrical explosive tubes looked very much like welding equipment, except for the stenciled military Cyrillic. "Those been kicking around a while?"

"The Basques swear by them. They work a charm against armored limos."

"Basque. I hear that language is even weirder than Finnish."

"You carry a gun, Starlet?"

"Not at the mo'."

"Take one little gun," said Raf generously. "Take that Makarov nine-millimeter. Nice combat handgun. Vintage Czech ammo. Very powerful."

"Maybe later," Starlitz said. "I might appropriate a key or so of that plastique. If you don't mind."

Raf smiled. "Why?"

"It's really hard finding good Semtex since Havel shut down the factories," Starlitz said moodily. "I might feel the need 'cause . . . I got this certain personal problem with video installations."

"Have a cigarette," said Raf sympathetically, shaking his pack. "I can see that you need one."

"Thanks." Starlitz lit a Gauloise. "Video's all over the place nowadays. Banks got videos . . . hotels got videos . . . groceries . . . cash machines . . . cop cars . . . Man, I hate video. I always hated video. Nowadays, video is really getting on my nerves."

"It's panoptic surveillance," said Raf. "It's the Spectacle."

Starlitz blew smoke and grunted.

"We should discuss this matter further," Raf said intently. "Work in the Struggle requires a solid theoretical 'grounding. Then you can focus this instinctive proletarian resentment into a coherent revolutionary response." He began sawing through a wrapped brick of Semtex with a butterknife from the kitchen drawer.

Starlitz ripped the plastique to chunks and stuffed them into his baggy pockets.

The door opened. Aino had returned. She had a companion: a very tall and spectrally pale young Finn with an enormous cotton-candy wad of steely purple hair. He wore a pearl-buttoned cowboy shirt and leather jeans. A large gold ring pierced his nasal septum and hung over his upper lip.

"Who is this?" smiled Raf, swiftly tucking the Makarov into the back of his belt.

"This is Eero," said Aino. "He programs. For the movement."

Eero gazed at the floor with a diffident shrug. "Many people are better hackers than myself." His eyes widened suddenly. "Oh. Nice guns!"

"This is our safe house," said Raf.

Eero nodded. The tip of his tongue stole out and played nervously with the dangling gold ring.

"Eero came quickly so we could get started at once," Aino said. She looked at the greasy arsenal with mild disdain, the way one might look at a large set of unattractive wedding china. "Now where is the money?"

Starlitz and Raf exchanged glances.

"I think what Raf is trying to say," said Starlitz gently, "is that traditionally you don't bring a contact to the safehouse. Safehouses are for storing weapons and sleeping. You meet contacts in open-air situations or public locales. It's just a standard way of doing business."

Aino was wounded. "Eero's okay! We can trust him. Eero's in my sociology class."

"I'm sure Eero is fine," said Raf serenely.

"He brought a cell-phone," Starlitz said, glancing at the holster on Eero's chrome-studded leather belt. "Cops and spooks can track people's movements through mobile cellphones."

"It's all right," Raf said gallantly. "Eero is your friend, my dear, so we trust him. Next time we are a bit more careful with our operational technique. Okay?" Raf spread his hands, judiciously. "Comrade Eero, since you're here, take a little something. Have a grenade."

"Truly?" said Eero, with a self-effacing smile. "Thank you." He tried stuffing a pineapple, without success, into the tight leather pocket of his jeans.

"Where is the money?" Arno repeated.

Raf shook his head gently. "I'm sure Mister Starlet is not so foolish to bring so much cash to our first meeting."

"The cash is at a dead drop," Starlitz said. "That's a standard method of

transferral. That way, if you're surveilled, the oppo can't make out your contacts."

"The tactical teachings of good old Patrice Lumumba University," said Raf cheerfully. "You were an alumnus, Starlet?"

"Nope," said Starlitz. "Never was the Joe College type. But the Russian mob's chock-full of Lumumba grads."

"I understand this money transfer tactic," murmured Eero, swinging the grenade awkwardly at the end of one bony wrist. "It's like an anonymous remailer at an Internet site. Removing accountability."

"Is the money in US dollars?" said Aino.

Raf pursed his lips. "We don't accept any so-called dollars that come from Russia, remember? Too much fresh ink."

"It's in yen," said Starlitz. "Three point two million US."

Raf brightened. "Point two?"

"It was three mill when we finalized the deal, but the yen had another uptick. Consider it a little gift from our Tokyo contacts. Don't launder it all in one place."

"That's good news," said Aino, with a tender smile.

Starlitz turned to Eero. "Is that enough bread to get you and your friends set up in the Alands with the networked Suns?"

Eero blinked limpidly. "The workstations have all arrived safely. No more problems in America with computer export restrictions. We could ship American computers straight to Russia if we liked."

"That's swell. Any problem getting proper crypto?"

Eero picked at a purple wisp of hair with his free hand. "The Dutch have been most understanding."

"Any problem leasing the bank building in the Alands, then?"

"We bought the building. With money to spare. It was a cannery, but the Baltic has been driftnetted, so. . . ." Eero shrugged his bony shoulders. "It has a little Turkish restaurant next door. So the programmers have plenty of pilaf and shashlik. Finn programmers . . . we like our pilaf."

"Pilaf!" Raf enthused, all jolliness. "I haven't had a decent pilaf since Beirut."

Starlitz narrowed his eyes. "How about your personnel? Any problems there?"

Eero nodded. "We wish we had more people on the start-up, of course. Technical

start-ups always want more people. Still, we have enough Finnish hackers to boot and run your banking system. We are mostly very young people, but if those Russian maths professors can log in from Leningrad -sorry, Petersburg--then we should have no big problems. The Russian maths people, they were all unemployed unfortunately for them. But they are very good programmers, very solid skills. The only problem with our many young hackers from Finland. . . . " Eero absently switched the grenade from hand to hand. "Well, we are so very excited about the first true Internet money-laundry. We tried very hard not to talk, not to tell anyone what we are doing, but . . . well, we're so proud of the work."

"Tell your mouse-jockeys to sit on the news a while longer," Starlitz said.

"Really, it's too late," Eero told him meekly.

Starlitz frowned. "Well, how many goddamn people have you Finn cowboys let in on this thing, for Christ's sake?"

"How many people read the alt newsgroups?" Eero said. "I don't have those figures, but there's alt.hack, alt.2600, alr.smash.the.state, alt.fan.blacknet. . . . Many."

Starlitz ran his hand over his head. "Right," he said. Like most Internet disasters, the situation was a fait accompli. "Okay, that development has torn it big-time. Aino, you did right to bring this guy here right away. The hell with proper operational protocol. We gotta get that bank up and running as soon as possible."

"There's nothing wrong with publicity," Raf said. "We need publicity to attract business."

"There'll be business all right," Starlitz said. "The Russian mob is already running the biggest money-laundry since the Second World War. The arms and narco crowd worldwide are banging down the doors. Black electronic cash is a vital component of the emergent global system. The point is -- we got a very narrow window of opportunity here. If our little crowd is gonna get anything out of this set-up, we have gotta be there with a functional online money-laundry just when the system really needs one. And just before everybody else realizes that."

"Then publicity is vital," Raf insisted. "Publicity is our oxygen! With a major development like this one, you must seize and create your own headlines. It's like Leila Khaled always says: 'The world has to hear our voice.'"

Aino blinked. "Is Leila Khaled still alive?"

"Leila lives!" Raf said. "Wonderful woman, Leila Khaled. She does social work in Damascus with the orphans of the Intifada. Soon she will be in the new Palestinian government."

"Leila Khaled," said Aino thoughtfully. "I envy her historical experience so much. There's something so direct and healthy and physical about hijacking planes."

Eero couldn't seem to find a place inside his clothing for the grenade. Finally

he placed it daintily on the kitchen counter and regarded it with morose respect.

"Any other questions?" Raf asked Starlitz.

"Yeah, plenty," Starlitz said. "The Organizatsiya's got their pet Russian math professors working the technical problems. I figure the Russians can hack the math -- Russians do great at that. But black-market online money laundering is a commercial customer service operation. Customer service is definitely not a Russian specialty."

"So?"

"So we can't hang around waiting for clearance from Moscow Mafia muckety-mucks. If this scheme is gonna work, we gotta slam it together and get it online pronto. We need quick results."

"Then you have the right man," said Raf briskly. "I always specialize in quick results." He shook Eero's hand. "You've been very helpful, Eero. It was pleasant to meet you. Enjoy your stay in the islands. We look forward to further constructive contacts. Viva la revolucion digitale! Goodbye and good luck."

"You don't have the big money for us yet?" Eero said.

"Real soon now," Starlitz said.

"Could I have some cab fare please?"

Starlitz gave him a 100-mark Jean Sibelius banknote. "Hei hei," Eero said, with a melancholy smile. He tucked the note into his cowboy shirt pocket and left.

Starlitz saw the hacker to the door, and checked the street as the cadaverous Finn ambled off. He was unsurprised to see Khoklov's two bodyguards lurking clumsily in a white Hertz rental car, parked up the street. Presumably they were relaying signals from the plethora of covert listening devices that the Russians had installed in Raf's safe-house.

Eero drifted past the Russian mobsters in a daze of hacker self-absorption. Starlitz found the kid an interesting specimen. In Japan there were plenty of major Goth kids, but the vampire people-in-black contingent had never really crossbred with Japan's hacker population. Here in Finland, though, there were somber and lugubrious hairsprayed Cure fans pretty much across the social spectrum: car repair guys, hotel staff, pizza delivery, government clerks, the works.

When Starlitz returned, Raf was hunting in the kitchen for coffee. "Aino, let's review the political situation."

Aino perched obediently on a birchwood kitchen stool. "The Aland Islands are a chain in the Gulf of Bothnia between Finland and Sweden. They include Aland, Foglo, Kokar, Sottunga, Kumlinge, and Brando."

"Yeah, right, okay," Starlitz grunted.

"The largest city is Mariehamn with ten thousand inhabitants." She paused.
"That's where the autonomous digital bank will be established."

"We're doing great so far."

"There are twenty-five thousand Åland citizens, mostly farmers and fishery people, but thirty percent are engaged in the tourist industry. They run small-scale casinos and duty-free shops. The Ålands are a popular day-tripping destination from continental Europe."

Starlitz nodded. He'd seen the shortlist of potential candidates for a Russian offshore banking set-up. The Ålands offered the tastiest possibilities.

Aino sat up straighter. "The inhabitants are Swedish-speaking ethnics. In 1920, against their will and against a popular plebiscite, they were ceded to Finland as part of a negotiated settlement by the now-extinct League of Nations. In truth these oppressed people are neither Swedes nor Finns. They are Ålanders."

"The islands' national liberation will proceed along two fronts," said Raf, deftly setting a coffeepot to boil. "The first is the Åland Island Liberation Front, which is, essentially, my operation. The second front is Aino's people from the university, the Suomi Anti-Imperialist Cells, who make it their cause to end the shameful injustice of Finnish imperialism. The outbreak of armed struggle and a terror campaign will provoke domestic crisis in Finland. The cheapest and easiest apparent solution will be to grant full autonomy to the Ålands. Since the islands are an easy day-trip from Petersburg this will leave the Organizatsiya with a free hand for their banking operations."

"You're a busy guy, Raf."

"I've been resting on my laurels long enough," said Raf, carefully rinsing three spanking-new coffee mugs. "It's a new Europe now. Many fantastic new opportunities."

"Level with me. Do any of these Åland Island hicks really want independence? They seem to be doing okay just as they are."

Raf, surprised at the question, smiled.

Aino frowned. "Much work remains to be done in the way of raising revolutionary consciousness in the Ålands. But we in the Suomi Anti-Imperialist Cells will have the resources to do that political work. Victory will be ours, because the Finnish liberal-fascist state does not have the capacity to restrain a captive nation against its will. Or if they do --" She smiled bitterly. "That will demonstrate the tenuousness of the current Finnish regime and its basic failure as a European state."

"Who have we got on the ground in the Ålands who can speak their local weirdo version of Swedish? Just in case we need to, like, phone in a claim or something."

"We have three people," Raf said. "The new premier, the new foreign minister,

and of course the new economics minister, who will be in charge of easing things for the Russian operations. They are the shadow cabinet of the Alands Republic."

"Three people?"

"Three people are plenty! There are only twenty-five thousand of them total. If the projections are right, the offshore bank will be clearing twenty-five million dollars in the first six months! Those islands are little rocks. It's potatoes and fish and casinos for rich Germans. The locals aren't players. The mob and their friends can buy them all."

"They matter," Aino said. "They matter to the Movement."

"But of course."

"The Alands deserve their nation. If they don't deserve their nation, then we Finns don't deserve our nation. There are only five million Finns."

"We always yield to political principle," said Raf indulgently. He passed her a brimming mug. "Drink your coffee. You need to go to work."

Aino glanced at her watch, surprised. "Oh. Yes."

"Shall I cut the hash into gram bags? Or will you take the brick?"

She blinked. "You don't have to cut it, Raffi. They can cut it at the bar."

Raf opened one of the sports bags and passed her a fat brick of dope neatly wrapped in a Copenhagen newspaper.

"You work in a bar? That's a good cover job," Starlitz said. "What kind of hash is that?"

"Something very new in Europe," Raf said. "It's Azerbaijani hash."

"Ex-Soviet hash isn't really very good," sniffed Aino. "They don't know how to do it right. . . . I don't like to sell hash. But if you sell people drugs, then they respect you. They won't talk about you when cops come. I hate cops. Cops are fascist torturers. They should all be shot. Do you need the car, Raf?"

"Take the car," Raf said.

Aino fetched her purse and left the safehouse.

"Interesting girl," commented Starlitz, in the sudden empty silence. "Never heard of any Finn terror groups before. Germans, French, Irish, Basques, Croats, Italians. Never Finns, though."

"They're a bit behind the times in this corner of Europe. She's one of the new breed. Very brave. Very determined. It's a hard life for terrorist women." Raf carefully sugared his coffee. "Women never get proper credit. Women kidnap ministers, women blow up trains -- women do very well at the work. But no one calls them 'armed revolutionaries.' They're always -- what does the press say?"

-- 'maladjusted female neurotics.' Or ugly hardened lesbians with a father-figure complex. Or cute little innocents, seduced and brain-washed by the wrong sort of man." He snorted.

"Why do you say that?" Starlitz said.

"I'm a man of my generation, you know." Raf sipped his coffee. "Once, I wasn't advanced in my feminist thinking. It was being close to Ulrike that raised my consciousness. Ulrike Meinhoff. A wonderful girl. Gifted journalist. Smart. Eloquent. Very ruthless. Quite good-looking. But Baader and that other one -- what was her name? They treated her so badly. Always yelling at her in the safehouse--calling her a gutless intellectual, spoilt child of the bourgeoisie and so forth. My God, aren't we all spoilt children of the bourgeoisie? If the bourgeoisie hadn't made a botch of us, we wouldn't need to kill them."

A car pulled up outside. The engine died and doors slammed.

Starlitz walked to the front window, peeked through the blind.

"It's the yuppies from next door," he said. "Looks like they're home early."

"We should introduce ourselves," Raf said. He began combing his hair.

"Uh-oh, scratch that," Starlitz said. "That's the guy who lives next door all right, but that's not the woman. He's got a different woman."

"A girlfriend?" Raf said with interest.

"Well, it's a much younger woman. In a wig, net hose and red high heels." The door in the next duplex opened and slammed. A stereo came on. It was playing a hot Cuban rhumba.

"This is a golden opportunity," said Raf, shoving his coffee mug aside. "Let's introduce ourselves now as his new neighbors. He'll be very embarrassed. He'll never look at us again. He'll never question us. Also, he'll keep his wife away from us."

"That's a good tactic," Starlitz said.

"All right. Let me do the talking." Raf went to the door.

"You still got that Makarov in the back of your belt, man."

"Oh yes. Sorry." Raf tossed the pistol onto the sleek Finnish couch.

Raf opened the front door. Then he back-stepped deftly back into the apartment and shut the door firmly. "There's a white rental car on the street."

"Yeah?"

"Two men inside it."

"Yeah?"

"Someone just shot them."

Starlitz hurried to the window. There were half a dozen people clustered across the street. Two of them had just murdered Khoklov's bodyguards, suddenly emptying silenced pistols through the closed glass of the windows. The street was not entirely deserted, but killing people with silenced pistols was a remarkably unobtrusive affair if done with brio and accuracy.

Four men began crossing the street. They wore jeans, jogging shoes, and, despite the heat, box-cut Giorgio Armani blazers. Two of them were carrying dainty little videocams. All of them were carrying guns.

"Zionists," Raf announced. Briskly, but without haste, he retreated to his arsenal on the kitchen floor. He slung an AK over his shoulder, propped a second assault rifle within easy reach, then knelt around the corner of the kitchen wall, giving himself a clear line of fire at the front door.

Starlitz quickly weighed various possibilities. He decided to keep watching the window.

With swift and deadly purpose, the hit-team marched to the adjoining duplex. The door broke off its hinges as they kicked their way in. There were brief yelps of indignant surprise, and a quiet multiple stuttering. A burst of Uzi slugs pierced the adjoining wall and embedded themselves in the floor.

Raf rose to his feet, his plump face the picture of glee. He touched one finger to his lips.

Footsteps clomped rapidly up and down the stairs in the next apartment. Doors banged, drawers opened. A bedside telephone jangled as it was knocked from its table. In three minutes the hit-team was out the door.

Raf scurried to the window and knelt. He'd grabbed a small pocket Nikon from his sports bag. He clicked off a roll of snapshots as the hit squad retreated. "I'm so tempted to shoot them," he said, hitching the sling of his assault rifle, "but this is better. This is very funny."

"That was Mossad, right?"

"Yes. They thought I was the neighbor."

"They must have had a description of you and the girl. And they know you're here in Finland, man. That's not good news."

"Let's phone in a credit for their hit. The Helsinki police might catch them. That would be lovely. Where is that cellphone?"

"Look, we were extremely lucky just now. We'd better leave."

"I'm always lucky. We have plenty of time." Raf gazed at his arsenal and sighed. "I hate to abandon these guns, but we have no car to carry them. Let's carry the guns next door, before we go! That should win us some nice press."

Starlitz met with Khoklov at two A.M. The midnight sun had given up its doomed attempt to sink and was now rising again in refulgent splendor. The two of them were strolling the spectrally abandoned streets of Helsinki, not too far from Khoklov's posh suite at the Arctia.

As European capitals went, Helsinki was a very young town. Most of it had been built since 1900, and quite a lot of that had been leveled by Russian bombers in the 1940s. Nevertheless the waterfront streets looked like stage-sets for the Pied Piper of Hamelin, all copper-gabled roofs and leaded glass and quaint window turrets.

"I miss my boys," Khoklov grumbled. "Why did they have to ice my boyst Stupidbastards."

"Lot of Russian Jews in Israel now. Israel's very hip to the Russian mafia scene. Maybe it was a message."

"No. They're just out of practice. They thought my boys were guarding Raf. They thought that poor fat Finn was Raf. Raf makes them nervous. He's been on their hit-list since the Munich Olympics."

"How'd they know Raf was here?"

"It's those hackers at the bank. They've been talking too much. Three of our depositors are big Israeli arms dealers." Khoklov was tired. He'd been up all night explaining developments by phone to an anxious cabal of millionaire ex-Chekists in Petersburg.

"Since the word is out, we've got to move this into high gear, ace."

"I know that only too well." Khoklov opened a gunmetal pillbox and dry-swallowed a pink tab. "The Higher Circles in Organizatsiya-- they love the idea of black electronic cash, but they're old-fashioned and skeptical. They say they want quick results, and yet they give me trouble about financing."

"I never expected those nomenklatura cats to come through for us," Starlitz said. "They're all ex-KGB bureaucrats, as slow as hell. If the Japanese shakedown works, we'll have the capital all right. You say they want results? What kind of results exactly?"

"You've met our golden boy now," said Khoklov. "What did you think of him? Be frank."

Starlitz weighed his words. "I think we're better off without him. We don't need him for a gig like this. He's over-qualified."

"He's good though, isn't he? A real professional. And he's always lucky. Lucky is better than good."

"Look, Pulat Romanevich. We've known each other quite a while, so I'm going to level with you. This guy is not right for the job. This Alands coup is a business thing, we're trying to hack the structure of multinational cash-flows.

It's the Infobahn. It's the nineties. It's borderless and it's happening. It's a high-risk start-up, sure, but so what? All Infobahn stuff is like that. It's global business, it's okay. But this is not a global business guy you've got here. This guy is a fuckin' golem. You used to arm him and pay him way back when. I'm sure he looked like some Che Guevara hippie poet rebel against capitalist society. But this guy is not an asset."

"You think he's crazy? Psychopathic? Is that it?"

"Look, those are just words. He's not crazy. He's what he is. He's a jackal. He feeds on dead meat from bigger crooks and spooks, and sometimes he kills rabbits. He thinks straight people are sheep. He's got it in for consumer society. Enough to blow up our potential customers and laugh about it. The guy is a nihilist."

Khoklov walked half a block in silence, shoulders hunched within his linen jacket. "You know something?" he said suddenly. "The world has gone completely crazy. I used to fly MiGs for the Soviet Union. I dropped a lot of bombs on Moslems, and I got medals. The pay was all right. I haven't flown a jet in combat in eight years. But I loved that life. It suited me, it really did. I miss it every day."

Starlitz said nothing.

"Now we call ourselves Russia. As if that could help us. We can't feed ourselves. We can't house ourselves. We can't even exterminate a lousy bunch of fucking Chechnians. It's just like with these fucking Finns! We owned them for eighty years. Then the Finns got smart with us. So we rolled in with tanks and the sons of bitches ran into their forests in the dark and the snow, and they kicked our ass! Even after we finally crushed them, and stole the best part of their country, they just came right back! Now it's fifty years later, and the Russian Federation owes Finland a billion dollars. There are only five million Finns! My country owes every single Finn two hundred dollars each!"

"It's that Marxist thing, ace." They walked on in silence.

"We're past the Marxist thing," said Khoklov, warming to his theme as the pill took hold. "Now it's different. This time Russia has a kind of craziness that is truly big enough and bad enough to take over the whole world. Massive; total, institutional corruption: Top to bottom: Nothing held back. A new kind of absolute corruption that will sell anything: the flesh of our women, the future of our children. Everything inside our museums and our churches. Anything goes for money: gold, oil, arms, dope, nukes. We'll sell the soil and the forests and the Russian sky. We'll sell our souls."

They passed the bizarre polychrome facade of a Finnish-Mexican restaurant. "Listen, ace," Starlitz said. "If it's the soul thing that's got you down, this guy won't help you there. It was a serious mistake to break him out of mothballs. You should have left him nodding-out in some bar in Baghdad listening to Bee Gees on vinyl. I don't know what you'll do about him now. You might try to bribe him with some kind of major ransom money, and hope he gets too drunk to move. But I don't think he'll do that for you. Bribes just flatter him."

"Okay," Khoklov said. "I agree. He's too dangerous, and he has too much past. After the coup, we kill him. I owe that much to Ilya and Lev, anyway."

"I appreciate that sentiment, but it's kinda late now, ace. You should have iced him when we knew where he was staying."

There was a distant hollow thump.

The Russian cocked his head. "Was that mortar fire?"

"Car bomb, maybe?" In the blue and lucid distance, filthy smoke began to rise.

Raf claimed that the abortive Israeli hit had been the twelfth attempt on his life. This might have been stretching the truth. It was only the second time that a Mossad hit-team had shot the wrong man in a neutral Scandinavian country.

Russians hated to commit themselves fully to a project. Seventy years of totalitarianism had left them with a terrific appetite for back-tracking, doublespeak and doublecross. Raf, however, delighted in providing quick

Granted, his Alands liberation campaign had had a few tactical setbacks. He'd had to abandon most of his favorite guns with the loss of his first safehouse. The Mossad team had escaped apprehension by the dumbfounded Finnish police. The car-bombing at the FinnAir office had cost Raf his yellow Fiat.

The Suomi Anti-Imperialist Cells excelled at spraying radical political graffiti, but their homemade petrol bombs at the lyviiskyla police station had done only minor damage. The outspoken Helsinki newspaper editor had survived his kneecapping and would probably walk again.

Nevertheless, Raf's ex-KGB sponsors back in Petersburg were impressed with the veteran's initiative and can-do spirit. They'd supplied another payoff.

With a brimming war-chest of mafia-supplied Euro-yen, Raf was on a roll. Raf had successfully infiltrated six Yankee mercs from the little-known but extremely violent American anarcho-rightist underground. Thanks to relaxed cross-border inspections in Europe and the dazed preoccupations of America's ninja tobacco inspectors, these Yankee gun-runners had boldly brought Raf an up-to-date and very lethal arsenal of NATO's remaindered best.

Raf also had ten Russian thugs on call. These men were combat-hardened mercenaries from the large contingent of thirty thousand ex-military professionals who guarded Russia's bankers. Russian bankers who were not Mafia-affiliated were shot down in droves by the black marketeers. Russian bankers who were Mafia-affiliated were generally killed by one another. These bankers' bodyguards were enjoying a booming trade. Being bodyguards, they naturally excelled at assassination.

These dangerous cliques of armed alien agitators would have been near-useless in Finland without the protection of locals on the ground. Raf had the Suomi Anti-Imperialist Cells to cover that front. The Suomi Anti-Imperialist Cells consisted of five hard-core undergraduates, plus a loose group of young fellow-travelers who would probably offer aide and shelter if pressed. The Cells

also had an ideological guru, a radical Finnish nationalist professor and poet who had no real idea what his teachings had wrought among his nation's postmodern youth.

So Raf had twenty or so people ready to use guns and bombs at his direction. To the uninitiated; this might not have seemed an impressive force. However, by the conventional standards of European terrorism, Raf was doing splendidly. National movements such as ETA, IRA, and PLO tended to be somewhat larger, due to their extensive labor-pool of the embittered and oppressed, but Raf the Jackal was a creature of a different breed: a true revolutionary internationalist, a freelance with a dozen passports. His Aland Island Liberation Front was big. It was bigger than Germany's Baader-Meinhof. It was bigger than France's Action Directe. It was about as big as the Japanese Red Army, and considerably better financed. A group of this sort could change history. A far more primitive conspiracy had murdered Abraham Lincoln.

Starlitz was listening to international Finland Radio on the shortwave. It was tough to find decent English-language coverage of the ongoing terror campaign. Despite their continued selfless service in the UN blue-helmet contingent, neutral Finland didn't have a lot of foreign friends. The internal troubles of a neutral country didn't compel much general interest.

This would likely change, however, now that Raf had brought in outside experts. Raf was giving his Yankee new-hires an extensive rundown on the theory and practice of detonating acetylene bottles.

Aino had rented the state-supported handicrafts center through the good offices of her student activist group. The walls of the terrorist hideaway were covered with weird woolly hangings, massive hand-saws, pine-tar soaps and eldritch Finnish glassware.

Aino was fully up-to-speed on improvised demolitions, so she had been appointed a look-out. She sat near a second-floor window overlooking the driveway, with a monster Finnish elk-rifle at hand. The job was tedious. Arno was leafing through a stack of English-language Fluuvin books which Starlitz had picked up at a Helsinki bookstore. Helsinki boasted bookstores half the size of aircraft hangars. The book thing was something to do during those long dark winters.

"How many of these did she write?" Aino said.

"Twenty-five. The hottest sellers are Froofies Go to Sea and Papa Froofy and the Mushroom Tigers."

"They seem even stranger in English. It's strange that she cares so much about her little blue creatures. She worries about them so much, and gets so emotionally touched about them, and they don't even really exist." Aino flipped through the pages. "Look, here the Fluuvins are walking through the fire-mists on big stilts. That's a good picture. And look! There's that cave creature that carries the harmonica and complains all the time."

"That would be Sperry the Nerkulen."

"Speffy the Nerkulen." Aino frowned. "That isn't a proper Finnish name. It isn't

Swedish either. Not even Aland Swedish."

Starlitz turned off the shortwave, which was detailing Finnish agricultural production. "She imagined Sperry, that's all. Sperry the Nerkulen just popped out of her little gray head. But Sperry the Nerkulen sure moves major product in Hokkaido."

Aino riffled the pages of the paperback. "I could make a book like this. She wrote this book fifty years ago. She was my age when she wrote and drew this book. I could do this myself."

"Why do you say that?"

She looked up. "Because I could, I know I could. I can draw. I can tell stories. I'm always telling stories to people at the bar. Once I did a band poster."

"That's swell. How'd you like to come along with me and brace up the little old lady? I need a Finnish translator, and a former Froofy fan would be great. Besides, she can give you helpful tips on kid-lit."

Aino looked at him, surprised. Slowly, she frowned. "What are you saying? I'm a revolutionary soldier. You should respect my political commitment. You wouldn't talk to me that way if I was a twenty-year-old boy."

"If you were a twenty-year-old boy, you'd fuckin' spit on Sperry the Nerkulen."

"No I wouldn't."

"Yes you would. Young soldier boys are cheaper than dirt. They're a fuckin' commodity. Who needs 'em? But a young female Froofy fan could be a very useful cut-out in some dicey negotiations."

"You're still lying to me. You should stop. I'm not fooled."

Starlitz sighed. "Look. It's the truth. Try and get it straight. You think the Aland Islands are important, right? Important enough to blow up trains for. Well, Sperry the Nerkulen is the most important thing that ever came out of the Akland Islands. Froofies are the only Alands product that you can't obtain anywhere else. Twenty-five thousand hick fishermen in the Baltic are doing great to produce a major worldwide pop hit like Sperry the Nerkulen. If the Alands were Jamaica, he'd be Bob Marley."

One of Raf's new recruits entered the room. He was bearded and muscular, maybe thirty. He wore a Confederate flag T-shirt and carried a Colt automatic in a belt holster. "Hey," he said. "Y'all speak English?"

"Yo," said Starlitz.

"Where's the can?"

Starlitz pointed.

"Hey babe," said the American, pausing. "That's a lady's rifle. You say the

word, I'll give you something serious to shoot with."

Aino said nothing. Her grip tightened on the rifle's polished walnut stock.

The American grinned at Starlitz. "She's got no English, huh? She's a Russian, right? I heard there'd be lots of Russian chicks in this operation. Man. What a dollar'll do these days." He rubbed his hands.

"Posse Comitatus?" Starlitz hazarded.

"Aw hell no. We're not militia. Those militia boys, they're all in a sweat over UN black helicopters and the New World Order. . . . That's bullshit! We know the New World Order. We got contacts. We're gonna be inside the goddamn black helicopters. Shoulder to shoulder with Ivan, this time!"

Finland had the most expensive booze in the world. This was Finnish social democratic policy, part and parcel with the world's lowest infant mortality rate. Nevertheless, Finns were truly fabulous drunks. The little Kasarmikatu bar was jammed with Finns methodically transiting from modest self-effacement to chest-pounding no-brakes bravado. A television barked above the shining racks of vodka and koskenkorva, showing broadcast news from across the Baltic. Another Parliamentary crisis in Moscow. A furious Russian delegate was pounding the podium in a blue vinyl jacket and a Megadeth T-shirt.

The Japanese financier set down his apple juice and adjusted his sunglasses. "His Holiness the Master does not approve of drunkenness. Alcohol clouds the vision and occludes the flow of ki."

"I can't believe we found a Japanese who won't drink after a business deal," Khoklov bitched in Russian. The Japanese money-man didn't speak or understand Russian. The three of them were clustered in the darkest corner of the Helsinki bar.

Starlitz spoke in Russian. "Our star depositor here has got a very severe case of that Pacific Rim New Age thing. These Supreme Truth guys are completely nuts. However, they're richer than God."

Starlitz silently toasted the money-man with a shot of Finnish cranberry vodka. He'd convinced their backer that this pulverizing liquor was cranberry juice. He switched to fluent gutter Japanese. "Khoklov-san tells me that he admires your electric skullcap very much. He wants to try one for himself. He is seeking health benefits and increased peace of mind."

"Saaaaa . . ." riposted Mr. Inoue, patting the plasticized top of his shaven head. "The electroneural stabilizers of His Holiness the Master. They will soon be in mass production at our Fuji fortress."

"You got like a kids' version of those, right?" said Starlitz.

"Of course. His Holiness the Master has many children."

"So have you ever considered, like, a pop commercial version of those gizmos? Like with maybe a fully licensed cartoon character?"

Mr Inoue blinked. "I was led to understand that Mister Khoklov's associates could supply us with military helicopters."

"The son of a bitch is on about the helicopters again," Starlitz explained in Russian.

Khoklov grunted. "Tell him we have a special on T-72 main battle tanks. Twenty million yen apiece. Just for him though. No resales."

Starlitz conferred at length with Mr. Inoue. "He's not interested in tanks. He wants at least six Mil-17 choppers with poison gas dispensers. Also some Spetsnaz Ranger vets to train the cult's judo commando unit on their sacred island of Ishigakijima."

"Spetsnaz veterans? Very well. We've got plenty. Tell him he'll have to find them visas and put up 'earnest money. Those black berets aren't your average goons."

Starlitz conferred again. "He wants to know if you know anything about laser ablation uranium-enrichment techniques."

"Nyet. And I'm getting pretty tired of that question."

"He wants to know if you're interested in learning how they do that sort of thing at Mitsubishi Heavy Industries."

Khoklov groaned. "Tell him I appreciate the lead on industrial atomic espionage, but that crap went out with Klaus Fuchs and the Rosenbergs."

Starlitz sighed. "Let's give Inoue-san a little face here, Pulat Romanevich. His Holiness the Master predicts the world will end in 1997. We play along with the cult's loony apocalypse myths, and we can lock in their deposits all the way through winter '96."

"Why do we need this plastic-headed lunatic?" Khoklov said. "He's a crooked exploiter of the gullible masses. He's running dummy companies inside Russia and recruiting Russian suckers for his ridiculous yoga cult. He needs us more than we need him. He's a long way from home. Put the strong-arm on him."

"Listen, ace. We need the cult's deposit money, because we need that yen disparity to cover the flow of black capital. Besides, I'm the Tokyo liaison for this gig! It's true the mafia could break his knees inside Russia, but back in Japan, his pals are building big stainless-steel bunkers full of giant microwaves."

"There are limits to my credulity, you know," Khoklov said testily. "Botulism breweries? Nerve gas factories? Hundreds of brainwashed New Age robots building computer chips for a half-blind master criminal in white pajamas? It's completely absurd, it's like something out of James Bond. Please inform this clown that he's dealing with real-life professionals."

Starlitz raised his hand and signaled. "Check please."

"Here you are sir," said Aino: "I hope you and your foreign friends are enjoying your stay in hospitable Helsinki."

After the helsinki disco bombing, Raf moved his center of operations to the Alands proper. The hardworking youngsters of the S.A-I.C. had found him another bolthole -- a sauna retreat in the dense woods of Kokar island. This posh resort belonged to a Swedish arms corporation who had once used it to entertain members of various Third World defense departments. Handy day-trips into the Alands had assured them privacy and avoided potential political embarrassments on Swedish soil. This Swedish company had fallen on hard times due to the massive Russian bargain-basement armaments sales. They were happy to sublet their resort to Khoklov's well-heeled shell company.

"We can't all be Leninist ascetics," Raf declared cheerily. "One can still be a revolutionary in decent shoes."

"Decent shoes count for plenty in Russia these days," Starlitz agreed.

Raf leaned back in his lacquered bentwood chair. The resort's central office, with its stained glass windows and maniacally sleek Alvar Aalto furniture, seemed to suit him very well. "We've reached a delicate stage of the revolutionary process," Raf said, lacing his fingers behind his head. "Integrating the dual strike-forces of the liberation front."

"You mean introducing your Yankee guys to your Russian guys?"

"Yes. And what better neutral ground for that encounter than the traditional Finnish sauna?" Raf smiled. "Lads together! Nothing to hide! No clothes. No guns! Just fresh clean steam. And plenty of booze. And since the boys have been training so hard, I've prepared them a nice surprise."

"Women."

Raf chuckled. "They are soldiers, you know." He leaned forward onto the desk. "Did you examine this resort? We have certain expectations to keep up!"

Starlitz had examined the resort and the grounds. There had been more hookers through the place than Bofors had heavy machine guns. The grounds were private and extensive. Coups had been launched successfully from less likely places.

Starlitz nodded. "I get the drill. You know that I have a business appointment with that little old lady today. You set this up this way on purpose, just so I'd miss all the fun."

Raf paused, and thought this over. "You're not angry with me, are you, Starlitz?"

"Why do you say that, Raf?"

"Why be angry with me? I'm loaning you Aino. Isn't that enough? I didn't have to give you a translator for your business scam. I'm trusting you, all alone on a little boat, with my favorite lieutenant. You should be grateful."

Starlitz stared at him. "Man, you're too good to me."

"You should look after Aino. My little jackal has been under strain. I know you are fond of her. Since you took such pains to speak with her behind my back."

"No, I'll leave her here with you tonight," Starlitz offered. "Let's see what your twenty naked, drunken mercs will do with a heavily armed poetry major."

Raf sighed in mock defeat. "Starlitz, you don't bullshit as easily as most really greedy people."

"Good of you to notice, man."

"Of course, I do want you to take Aino away for a while. She's young, and she would misinterpret this. Let's be very frank. These men I bought for us -- they are brutal men who kill and die for pay. They must be given rewards and punishments that they can understand. They're whores with guns."

"I'm always happiest when I know the worst, Raf. You haven't told me the worst yet."

"Why should I confide in you? You never confide in me." Raf pushed an ashtray across the desk. "Have a cigarette."

Starlitz took a Gauloise.

Raf lit it with a flourish, then lit his own. "You talk a lot, Starlitz," he said. "You bargain well. But you never talk about yourself. Everything I discovered about you, I have found out through other people." Raf coughed a bit. "For instance, I know that you have a daughter. A daughter that you've never seen."

"Yeah, sure."

"I have seen your daughter. I have photos. She's not like you. She's cute."

"You've got photos, man?" Starlitz sat up. "Video?"

"Yes, I have photos. I have more than that. I have contacts in America who know where your daughter is living. She lives with those strange West Coast women."

"Yeah, well, I admit they're plenty strange, but it's one of those postnuclear family things," Starlitz said at last.

"Would you like to meet your daughter? I could snatch her and deliver her to you here in the Alands. That would be easy."

"The arrangement's not so bad as it stands," Starlitz said. "They let me send her kids'books. . . ."

Raf put his sock-clad feet on the desk. "Maybe you need to settle down, Starlitz. When a man gets to a certain age, he has to live with his decisions."

Take me, for instance. Basically, I'm a family man."

"Wow."

"That's right. I've been married for twenty years. My wife's in a French prison. They caught her in '78."

"That's a long stretch."

"I have two children. One by my wife, one by a girl in Beirut. People think a man like Raf the Jackal must have no private life. They don't give me credit for my dreams. Did you know I've written journalism? I've even written poetry. Poetry in Italian and Arabic."

"You don't say."

"Oh, but I do say. I will say more, since it's just the two of us. No Russians here at the resort yet, to set up their tiresome bugging networks. . . . I have a good feeling about you, Stalitz. You and I, we're both postmodern men of the world. We saw an empire break to pieces. That had nothing to do with silly old Karl Marx, you know."

"Could be, man."

"It was the 1990s at work. Breaking up is very infective. It's everywhere now. It's out of control, like AIDS. Did you ever meet a Lebanese warlord? Jumblatt, perhaps? Berri? Splendid fellows. Men like lions."

"Never met "em."

"That's a very good life, you know -- becoming a warlord. It's what happens to terrorists when they grow up."

Starlitz nodded It was a very dangerous thing to have Raf so worried about his good opinion, but he couldn't help but be pleased.

"You seize a port," Raf explained. "You grow dope. You buy guns. It's like a little nation, but you don't need any lawyers, or any bureaucrats, or any ad-men, or any stupid bastards in suits. You have the guns, and you have the power. You tell them what to do, and they run and do it. Maybe it can't last forever. But as long as it lasts, it's heaven."

"This is good, Raf. You're leveling with me now. I appreciate that, I really do."

"The press says that I like to kill people. Well, of course I like to kill people! It's thrilling. It gives your life a heroic dimension. If it wasn't thrilling to kill people, people wouldn't buy tickets to movies where people are killed. But if I wanted to kill, I'd go to Chechnya, Georgia, Abkhazia. That's not the trick. Any idiot can become a warlord inside a war zone. The trick is to become a warlord where people are fat and soft and rich ! You want to become a warlord just outside a massive, disintegrating empire. This is the perfect spot! I know I've had my little setbacks in the past. But the ninties are the sixtiess

upside down. This time, I'm going to win, and keep what I win! I'm going to seize these little islands. I'll declare martial law and rule by decree."

"What about your three-man provisional government?"

"I've decided those boys are not reliable. I didn't like the way they talked about me. So, I'll short-cut the process, and produce very quick and decisive results. I'll take twenty-five thousand people hostage."

"How do you manage that?"

"How? By claiming that I have a Russian low-yield nuke, which in fact I don't. But who would dare to try my bluff? I'm Raf the Jackal! I'm the famous Raf! They know I'm capable of that."

"Low yield nuke, huh? I guess the old terrie scenarios are the good ones. . . ."

"Of course I don't have any such nuke. But I do have ten kilos of cheap radioactive cesium. When they fly geiger counters over -- or whatever silly scientific thing those SWAT squads use -- that will look very convincing. The Finns won't dare risk another Chernobyl. They still glow in the dark from that last one. So I'm being very reasonable, don't you agree? I'm only asking for a few small islands and a few thousand people. I'll observe the proper niceties, if they allow me that. I'll make a nice flag and some coinage."

Starlitz rubbed his chin. "The coinage thing should be especially interesting given the electronic bank angle."

Raf opened a desk drawer and produced a shotglass and a duty-free bottle of Finnish cloudberry liqueur. The booze in the Alands was vastly cheaper than Finland's. "Singapore is only a little island," Raf said, squinting as he poured himself a shot. "Nobody ever complains about Singapore's nuclear weapon."

"I hadn't heard that, man."

"Of course they have one! They've had it for fifteen years. They bought the uranium from the South Africans during apartheid, when the Boers were desperate for money. And they built the trigger themselves. Singaporeans will take that kind of trouble. They are very industrious."

"Makes sense to me." Starlitz paused. "I'm still getting a general handle on your proposal. Give me the long-term vision, Raf. Let's say that you get what you want, and they somehow let you keep it. What then? Give me ten years down the road."

"People always asked me that question," Raf said, sipping. "You want one of these cloudberrys? Little golden berries off the Finnish tundra, it surprises me how sweet they are."

"No thanks, but don't let me stop you, man."

"In the old days, people would ask me -- mostly these were hostage negotiators,

all the talking would get old and we'd all get rather philosophical sometimes. . . "Raf screwed the cap precisely onto the liqueur bottle. "They'd say to me, Raf, what about this Revolution of yours? What kind of world are you really trying to give us? I've had a long time to consider that question."

"And?"

"Did you ever hear the Jimi Hendrix rendition of 'The Star-Spangled Banner?'"

Starlitz blinked. "Are you kidding? That cut still moves major product off the back catalog."

"Next time, really listen to that piece of music. Try to imagine a country where that music truly was the national anthem. Not weird, not far-out, not hip, not a parody, not a protest against some war, not for young Yankees stoned on some stupid farm in New York. Where music like that was social reality. That is how I want people to live. People are sheep, and they don't have the guts to live that way. But if I get a chance, I can make them do it."

Starlitz liked speed launches. Piloting them was almost as much fun as driving. Raf's had stolen from Copenhagen and motored it across the Baltic at high speed. Since it was a classic dope-smuggler's vehicle, the Danish cops would assume it had been hijacked by dope people. They wouldn't be far wrong.

Starlitz examined the nautical map.

"I shot a cop today," Aino said.

Starlitz looked up. "Why do you say that?"

"I shot a cop dead. It was the constable in Mariehamn. I went into his little office. I told him someone stole the spare tire from my car. I took him around the back of his little office to see my car. I opened the trunk, and when he looked inside for the tire, I shot him. Three times. No, four times. He fell right into the trunk. So I threw him in the trunk and shut it. Then I drove away with him."

Starlitz folded the nautical map very carefully. "Did you phone in a credit?"

"No. Raf says it's better if we disappear the cop. We'll say he that defected back to Finland with the secret police files. That will be a good propaganda coup."

"You really iced this guy? Where's the body?"

"It's in this boat," Aino said.

"Take the wheel," said Starlitz. He left the cockpit and looked into the launch's fiberglass hold. There was a very dead man in uniform in it.

Starlitz turned to her. "Raf sent you to ice him all by yourself?"

"No," said Aino proudly, "he sent Matti and Jorma with me, but I made them keep

watch outside." She paused. "People lie when they say it's hard to kill. Killing is very simple. You move your finger three times. Or four times. You imagine doing it, and then you plan it, and then you do it. Then it's done."

"How do you plan to deal with the evidence here?"

"We wrap the body in chains that I bought in the hardware store. We drop him into the Baltic between here and the little old lady's island. Here, take the wheel."

Starlitz went back to piloting. Aino hauled the dead cop out of the hold. The corpse outweighed her considerably, but she was strong and determined, and only occasionally squeamish. She hauled the heavy steel chains around the corpse with a series of methodical rattles, stopping every few moments to click them tight with cheap padlocks.

Starlitz watched this procedure while managing the wheel. "Was it Raf's idea to send along a corpse with my negotiations?"

Aino looked up gravely. "This is the only boat we have. I had to use this boat. We don't seize the ferries until later."

"Raf likes to send a message."

"This is my message. I killed this cop. I put him in this boat. He's a uniformed agent from the occupying power. He's a legitimate hard target." Aino tossed back her braids, and sighed. "Take me seriously, Mister Starlitz. I'm a young woman, and I dress like a punk because I like to, and maybe I read too many books. But I mean what I say. I believe in my cause. I come from a small obscure country, and my group is a small obscure group. That doesn't matter, because we are committed. We truly are an armed revolutionary strike force. I'm going to overthrow the government here and take over this country. I killed an oppressor today. That is a duty of an armed revolutionary. "

"So you take the islands by force. Then what?"

"Then we'll be rid of these Aland ethnics. They'll be on their own. After that, we Finns can truly be Finns. We'll become a truly Finnish nation, on truly authentic Finnish principles."

"Then what?"

"Then we move into the Finno-Ugric lands that the Russians stole from us! We can take back Karelia. And Komi. And Kanti-Mansiysk." She looked at him and scowled. "You've never even heard of those places. Have you? They're sacred to us. They're in the Kalevala. But you, you've never even heard of them. . . ."

"What happens after that?"

She shrugged. "is that my problem? I'll never see that dream fulfilled: I think the cops will kill me before then. What do you think?"

"I think these are gonna be kind of touchy book-contract negotiations."

"Stop worrying," Aino said. "You worry too much about trivial things." She gave a last methodical wrap of the chain, and heaved the dead cop overboard. The corpse bobbed face-down in the wake of the boat, then slowly sank from sight.

Aino reached over the fiberglass gunwale and cleaned her hands in the racing seawater. "Just talk slowly to her," she said. "The old lady writes in Swedish, did you know that? I found out all about her. That's her first language, Swedish. But they say her Finnish is very good. For an Jdander."

Starlitz pulled up at the little wooden dock. The entire island, shored in weed-slimed dark granite, was about twenty acres. The little old lady lived here with her even older and hailer brother. They'd both been born on the island, and had originally lived with their parents, but the father had died in 1950 and the mother in 1968.

The only access to the island was by boat. There were no phones, no electricity and no plumbing. The home was a two-story stone mansion with a steep slate roof, a stone well and a wooden outhouse. The eaves were carved and painted in yellow and red. There were some chickens and a couple of squat little island sheep. A skinny wooden derrick had a homemade lighthouse, with an oil lantern. A lot of seagulls around.

Starlitz yelled a loud ahoy from the dock, which seemed the most polite approach, but there was no answer from the house. So they trudged up across the rocks and turf, and found the mansion's door and knocked. No response.

Starlitz tried the salt-warped door. It was unlocked. The windows were open and a faint breeze was playing through the parlor. There were hundreds of shelved books in Finnish and Swedish, some fluttering papers, and quite a few cheerily demented oil paintings. Some quite handsome bronze statuary and some framed Finnish theater posters from the 1930s. A wind-up Victrola.

Starlitz opened the hall closet and looked at the rough weather gear -oilskins and boots. "You know something? This little old lady is as tail as a house. She's a goddamned Viking." He left the parlor for the composition room. He found a wooden secretary and a fine velvet chair. Dictionaries, a Swedish encyclopedia. Some well-thumbed travel hooks and Nordic photography collections. "There's nothing in here," he muttered.

"What are you looking for?" said Aino.

"I dunno exactly. Something to explain how this works."

"Here's a note!" Arno called.

Starlitz went back into the parlor. He took the note, which had been written in copperplate longhand on lined Sperry the Nerkulen novelty notepaper.

"Dear Mister Staffins," read the note, "Please pardon my not here being. I go to Helsingfors to testify. I go to Suomi Parliament as long needing for civic duty call. I regret I must miss you and hoping to speak with you about my many readers in Tokio another much more happier time. Sorry you must row so far and

not have meet. Please help your self(s) to tea and biscuits all ready in kitchen. Goodbye!"

"She's gone to Helsinki," Starlitz said.

"She never travels any more. I'm very surprised." Aino frowned. "She could have saved us a lot of trouble if she had a cellphone."

"Why would they want her in Helsinki?"

"Oh, they made her go there, I suppose. The local Alanders. The local collaborationist power structure."

"What good do they think she can do? She's not political."

"That's true, but they are very proud of her here. After all, the children's clinic -- The Fluuvn's Children's Clinic in Foglo? -- that was hers."

"Yeah?."

"Also the park in Sottunga. The Fluuvn Park in Brando and the Grand Fluuvn Festival Playground. She built all of those. She never keeps the money. She gives the money away. Mostly to the Fluuvn Pediatric Disease Foundation."

Starlitz pulled off his shades and wiped his forehead. "You wouldn't know exactly which pediatric diseases in particular have caught her fancy, right?"

"I never understood such behavior," said Aino: "Really, it must be a mental illness. A childless spinster from the unjust social order . . . Denied any healthy sex life or outlets. . . . Living as a hermit with all her silly books and paintings all these years . . . No wonder she's gone mad."

"Okay, we're going back," Starlitz said. "I've had it."

Raf and Starlitz were outside in the woods, slapping at the big slow-moving Scandinavian mosquitoes. "I thought we had an understandings" Raf said, over a muffled chorus of bestial howls from the sauna. "I told you not to bring her back here."

"She's your lieutenant, Raf. You straighten her out."

"You could have been more tactful. Invent some little deception."

"I didn't wanna get dumped off the boat." Starlitz scratched his bitten neck. "I face a very serious kink in my negotiations, man. My target decamped big-time and I got a very limited market window. This is Japanese pop culture we're talking here. The Japanese run product cycles in hyperdrive. They can burn out a consumer vogue in four weeks flat. There's nobody saying that Froofies will move long-term product like Smurfs or Seuss."

"I understand your financial difficulties with your Tokyo backers. If you can just be patient. We can take steps. We'll innovate. If necessary the Republic of the Alands will nationalize literary production."

"Man, the point of this thing is to sue the guys in Japan who are already ripping her off. We gotta have something on paper that looks strong enough to stand up and bark in the courts in The Hague. You gonna strong-arm people anywhere over vaporous crap like intellectual property, it's gotta look heavy-duty, or they don't back off."

"Now you're frightening me," Raf said. "You should take a little time in the sauna. Relax. They're running videos."

"Videos right in all that goddamn steam, Raf?"

Raf nodded. "These are some very special videos."

"I fuckin' hate videos, man."

"They're Bosnian videos."

"Really?"

"Not easy to obtain. They're from the camps."

"You're showing those mercs atrocity videos?"

Raf spread his arms. "Welcome to 21st Century Europe!" he shouted at the empty shoreline. "Brand-new European apartheid regimes! Where gangs of war criminals abduct and systematically rape women from other ethnic groups. While the studio lights blaze and the minicams roll!"

"I'd heard those rumors," Starlitz said slowly. "Pretty hard to believe them though."

"You go inside that sauna, and you'll believe those videos. It's quite incredible, but it's all quite real. You might not enjoy them very much, but you need to see this video documentation. You must come to terms with these practices in order to understand modern political developments. It's video that is like raw meat."

"Must be faked, man."

Raf shook his head. "Europeans always say that. They always ignore the rumors. They always discover the atrocities when it is five years too late. Then they act very shocked and concerned. Those videos exist, my friend. I've got them. And I've got more than that. I've got some of the women."

"You're kidding."

"I bought the women. I bartered them for a pair of Stinger missiles. Fifteen Bosnian abductees. I had them shipped up here in sealed cargo trucks. I went to a lot of trouble."

"White slavery, man?"

"I'm not particular about color. It wasn't me who enslaved them. I'm the man who saved their lives. There were many other girls who were more stubborn or, who knows, probably less pretty. They're all dead in a ditch with bullets in the backs of their heads. These women are survivors. I wish I had more than fifteen of them, but I'm only getting started." Raf smiled. "Fifteen human souls! I rescued fifteen people! Do you know that's more people than I've ever personally killed?"

"What are you going to do with these women?"

"They'll entertain my loyal troops, first of all. I needed them for that, which gave me the idea. I admit this: it's very hard work in the sex-labor industry. But under my care, at least they won't be shot afterwards."

Raf strolled along the rocky shoreline to the edge of the resort's dock. It was a nice dock, well-outfitted. The fiberglass speed launch was tied up to one rubber-padded edge of it, but the dock could have handled a minor cruise ship.

"Those women will be grateful. Here, we will admit they exist! They haven't even had identities. And this world is full of people like them. After ten years of civil war, they sell slaves openly now in the Sudan. Kurds are gassed like vermin by Iraqis and shot out of hand by Turks. The Sinhalese are killing Tamils. We can't forget East Timor. All over the planet, groups of little people are quietly vanishing. You can find them cowering, hiding all around the world, without papers, without legal identities. . . . The world's truly stateless people. My kind of people. But these are rich little islands -- where there is room for thousands of them."

"This is a serious new wrinkle to the scheme, man. Did you clear it with Petersburg?"

"This development does not require debate," Raf said loftily. "It is a moral decision. People should not be killed in pogroms, by brutes who hate them merely because they are different. As a revolutionary idealist, I refuse to stomach such atrocities. These oppressed people need a great leader. A visionary. A savior. Me."

"Kind of a personality-cult thing then."

Raf shook his long-haired head in sorrow. "Oh you'd prefer them all quietly dead, I suppose! Like everyone else in the modern world who never lifts a hand to help them!"

"What if the locals complain?"

"I'll make the aliens into citizens. I'll have them out-vote all the locals. A warlord, justly voted into power by the will of the majority--wouldn't that be lovely? I'll raise a postmodern Statue of Liberty for the world's huddled masses. Not like that pious faker in New York Harbor. Refugees aren't vermin, even if the rich despise them. They're displaced human beings without a place to rally. Let them rally here with me! By the time I leave power -- years from now, when I'm old and gray -- they'll be accomplishing great works in these little islands."

The hookers arrived on a fishing trawler. They looked very much like normal hookers from the world's fastest-growing hooker economy, Russia. They might have been women from the Baltic States. They looked like Slavic women at any rate. When they climbed from the trawler they looked rather seasick, but they seemed resolved. Not panicked, not aghast, not crushed by terror. Just like a group of fifteen more-or-less-young women, in microskirts and spandex, about to go through the hard work of having sex with strangers.

Starlitz was unsurprised to find Khoklov shepherding the hookers. Khoklov was accompanied by two brand-new bodyguards. The number of people aware of Raf's location was necessarily kept small.

"I hate working as a pimp," Khoklov groaned. He had been drinking on the boat. "At times like these, I truly know I've become a criminal."

"Raf says these girls are Bosnian slave labor. What's the scoop?"

Khoklov started in surprise. "What do you mean? What do you take me for? These girls are Estonian hookers. I brought them over from Tallin myself."

Lekhi watched carefully as the bodyguards shepherded their charges toward the whooping brutes inside the sauna. "That sure sounds like Serbo-Croatian those girls are talking, ace."

"Nonsense. That's Estonian. Don't pretend you can understand Estonian. Nobody understands that Finno-Ugric jabber."

"Raf told me these women are Bosnians. Says he bought them and he's going to keep them. Why would he say that?"

"Raf was joking with you."

"What do you mean, 'joking?' He says they're victims from a rapists' gulag! There's nothing funny about that! There just isn't any way to make that funny."

Khoklov gazed at Starlitz in mournful astonishment. "Lekhi, why do you want gulags to be 'funny'? Gulags aren't funny. Pogroms aren't funny. War is not funny. Rape is never funny. Human life is very hard, you see. Men and women truly suffer in this world."

"I know that, man."

Khoklov looked him over, then slowly shook his head. "No, Lekhi, you don't know that. You just don't know it the way that a Russian knows it."

Starlitz considered this. It seemed inescapably true. "Did you ask those girls if they were from Bosnia?"

"Why would I ask them that? You know the official Kremlin line on the Yugoslav conflict. Yeltsin says that our fellow Orthodox Slavs are incapable of such crimes. Those rape-camp stories are alarmist libels spread by Catholic Croats and Bosnian Muslims. Relax, Lekhi. These women here today, they are all Estonian

professionals. You can have my word on that."

"Raf just gave me his word in a form that was highly otherwise."

Khoklov looked him in the eye. "Lekhi, who do you believe: some hippie terrorist, or a seasoned KGB officer and member in good standing of the Russian mafia?"

Starlitz gazed down at the flower-strewn Aland turf. "Okay, Pulat Romanevich. . . For a moment there, I was actually considering taking some kind of, you know, action Well, never mind. Lemme get to the point. Our bank deal is falling apart."

Khoklov was truly shocked. "What do you mean? You can't be serious. We're doing wonderfully. Petersburg loves us."

"I mean that the old lady can't be bought. She's just too far away to touch. The deal is dead meat, ace. I don't know just how the momentum died, but I can sure smell the decay. This situation is not sustainable, man. I think it's time you and me got the hell out of here."

"You couldn't get your merchandising deal? That's a pity, Lekhi. But never mind that. I'm sure we can find some other capitalization scheme that's just as quick and just as cheap. There's always dope and weapons."

"No, the whole set-up stinks. It was the video thing that tipped me off. Pulat, did I ever tell you about the fact that I, personally, never show up on video?"

"What's that, Lekhi?"

"At least, I didn't used to. Back in the eighties, if you pointed a video camera at me it would crack, or split, or the chip would blow. I just never registered on videotape."

Slowly, Khoklov removed a silver flask from within his suit jacket. He had a long contemplative glug, then shuddered violently. He focused his eyes on Starlitz with weary deliberation. "I beg your pardon. Would you repeat that, please?"

"It's that whole video thing man. That's why I got into the online business in the first place. Originally, I was a very analog kind of guy. But the video surveillance was seriously getting me down. I couldn't even walk down to the corner store for a pack of cigs without setting off half a dozen goddamn videos. But then -- I discovered online anonymity. Online encryption. Online pseudonymity. That really helped my personal situation. Now I had a way to stay underground, stay totally unknown, even when I was being observed and monitored twenty-four hours a day. I found a way that I could go on being myself."

"Lekhi, are you drunk?"

"Nyet. Pay attention, ace. I'm leveling with you here."

"Did Raf give you something to drink?"

"Sure. We had a coffee earlier."

"Lekhi, you're on drugs. Do you have a gun? Give it to me now."

"Raf gave all the guns to the Suomi kids. They're keeping the guns still the mercs sober up. Simple precaution."

"Maybe you're still jetlagged. It's hard to sleep properly when the sun never sets. You should go lie down."

"Look, ace, I'm not the kind of fucking wimp who doesn't know when he's on acid. Normal people's rules just don't apply to me, that's all. I'm not a normal guy. I'm Leggy Starlitz, I'm a very, very strange guy. That's why I tend to end up in situations like this." Starlitz ran his hand over his sweating scalp. "Lemme put it this way. You remember that mafia chick you were banging back in Azerbaijan?"

Khoklov took a moment to access the memory. "You mean the charming and lovely Tamara Akhmedovna?"

"That's right. The wife of the Party Secretary. I leveled with Tamara in a situation like this. I told her straight-out that her little scene was coming apart. I couldn't tell her why, but I just knew it. At the time, she didn't believe me, either. Just like you're not believing me, now. You know where Tamara Akhmedovna is, right now? She's selling used cars in Los Angeles."

Khoklov had gone pale. "All right," he said. He whipped the cellular from an inner pocket of his jacket. "Don't tell me any more. I can see you have a bad feeling. Let me make some phone calls."

"You want Tamara's phone number?"

"No. Don't go away. And don't do anything crazy. All I ask is -- just let me make a few contacts." Khoklov began punching digits.

Starlitz walked by the sauna. Four slobbering, buck-naked drunks dashed out and staggered down the trail in front of him. Their pale sweating hides were covered with crumpled green birch leaves from Finnish sauna whisks. They plunged into the chilly sea with ecstatic grunts of ambiguous pain.

Somewhere inside, the New World Order comrades were singing Auld Lang Syne. The Russians were having a hard time finding the beat.

Raf was enjoying a snooze in the curvilinear Aalto barcalounger when Khoklov and Starlitz woke him.

"We've been betrayed," Khoklov announced.

"Oh?" said Raf. "Where? Who is the traitor?"

"Our superiors, unfortunately."

Raf considered this, rubbing his eyelids. "Why do you say that?"

"They liked our idea very much," Khoklov said. "So they stole it from us."

"Intellectual piracy, man," Starlitz said. "It's a bad scene."

"The Alands deal is over," Khoklov said. "The Organizatsiya's Higher Circles have decided that we have too much initiative. They want much closer institutional control of such a wonderful idea. Our Finnish hacker kids have jumped ship and joined them. They re-routed all the Suns to Kaliningrad."

"What is Kaliningrad?" Raf said.

"It's this weird little leftover piece of Russia on the far side of all three independent Baltic nations," Starlitz said helpfully. "They say they're going to make Kaliningrad into a new Russian Hong Kong. The old Hong Kong is about to be metabolized by the Chinese, so the Mafia figures it's time for Russia to sprout one. They'll make this little Kaliningrad outpost into a Baltic duty-free zone cum European micro-buffer state. And they're paying our Finn hacker kids three times what we pay, plus air fare."

"The World Bank is helping them with development loans," Khoklov said. "The World Bank loves their Kaliningrad idea."

"Plus the European Union, man. Euros love duty-free zones."

"And the Finns too," Khoklov said. "That's the very worst of it. The Finns have bought us out. Russia used to owe every Finn two hundred dollars. Now, Russia owes every Finn one hundred and ninety dollars. In return for a rotten little fifty million dollar write-off, my bosses sold us all to the Finns. They told the Finns about our plans, and they sold us just as if we were some lousy division of leftover tanks. The Finnish Special Weapons and Tactics team is flying over here right now to annihilate us."

Raf's round and meaty face grew dark with fury. "So you've betrayed us, Khoklov?"

"It's my bosses who let us down," Khoklov said sturdily. "Essentially, I've been purged. They have cut me out of the Organizatsiya. They liked the idea much more than they like me. So I'm expendable. I'm dead meat."

Raf turned to Starlitz. "I'll have to shoot Pulat Romanevich for this. You realize that, I hope."

Starlitz raised his brows. "You got a gun, man?"

"Aino has the guns." Raf hopped up from his lounge and left.

Khoklov and Starlitz hastily followed him. "You're going to let him shoot me?" Khoklov said sidelong.

"Look man, the guy has kept us his end. He always delivered on time and within specs."

They found Aino alone in the basement. She had her elk rifle.

"Where's the arsenal?" Raf demanded.

"I had Matti and Jorma take all the weapons from this property. Your mercenaries are terrible beasts, Raf."

"Of course they're beasts," Raf said. "That's why they follow a Jackal. Lend me your rifle for a moment, my dear. I have to shoot this Russian."

Aino slammed a thumb-sized cartridge into the breech and stood up. "This is my favorite rifle. I don't give it to anyone."

"Shoot him yourself, then," Raf said, backing up half a step with a deft little hop. "His Mafia people have blown the Movement's program. They've betrayed us to the Finnish oppressors."

"Police are coming from the mainland," Starlitz told her. "It's over. Time to split, girl. Let's get out of here."

Aino ignored him. "I told you that Russians could never be trusted," she said to Raf. Her face was pale, but composed. "What did American mercenaries have to do with Finland? We could have done this easily, if you were not so ambitious."

"A man has to dream," Raf said. "Everybody needs a big dream."

Aino centered her rifle on Khoklov's chest. "Should I shoot you." she asked him, in halting Russian.

"I'm not a cop," Khoklov offered hopefully.

Aino thought about it. The rifle did not waver. "What will you do, if I don't shoot you?"

"I have no idea what I'll do," Khoklov said, surprised. "What do you plan to do, Raf?"

"Me?" said Raf. "Why, I could kill you with these hands alone." He held out his plump, dimpled hands in karate position.

"Lot of good that'll do you against a chopper full of angry Finnish SWAT team," Starlitz said.

Raf squared his shoulders. "I'd love to take a final armed stand on this territory! Battle those Finnish oppressors to the death! However, unfortunately, I have no arsenal."

"Run away, Raf," Aino said.

"What's that, my dear?" said Raf.

"Run, Raffi. Run for your life. I'll stay here with your stupid hookers, and your drunken, naked, mercenary losers, and when the cops come, I'm going to

shoot some of them."

"That's not a smart survival move," Starlitz told her.

"Why should I run like you? Should I let my revolution collapse at the first push from the authorities, without even a token resistance? This is my sacred cause!"

"Look, you're one little girl," Starlitz said.

"So what? They're going to catch all your stupid whores, the men and the women, in a drunken stupor. The cops will put them all in handcuffs, just like that. But not me. I'll be fighting I'll be shooting. Maybe they'll kill me. They're supposed to be good, these SWAT cops. Maybe they'll capture me alive. Then, I'll just have to live inside a little stone house. All by myself. For a long, long time. But I'm not afraid of that! I have my cause. I was right! I'm not afraid."

"You know," said Khoklov brightly, "if we took that speed launch we could be on the Danish coast in three hours."

Spray whipped their faces as the Alands faded in the distance.

"I hope there aren't too many passport checks in Denmark," Khoklov said anxiously.

"Passports aren't a problem," Raf said. "Not for me. Or for my friends."

"Where are you going?" Khoklov asked.

"Well," said Raf, "perhaps the Alands offshore bank scheme was a little before its time. I'm a visionary, you know. I was always twenty years ahead of my time--but nowadays maybe I'm only twenty minutes." Raf sighed. "Such a wonderful girl, Aino! She reminded me so much of . . . well, there have been so many wonderful girls. . . . But I must sacrifice my habit of poetic dreaming! At this tragic juncture, we must regroup, we must be firmly realistic. Don't you agree, Khoklov? We should go to the one locale in Europe that guarantees a profit."

"The former Yugoslavia?" Khoklov said eagerly. "They say you can make a free phone call anywhere in the world from Belgrade. Using a currency that doesn't even exist any more!"

"Obvious potential there," said Raf. "Of course, it requires operators who can land on their feet. Men of action. Men on top of their profession."

"Bosnia-Herzegovina," Khoklov breathed, turning his reddened face to yet another tirelessly rising sun. "The new frontier! What do you think, Starlitz?"

"I think I'll just hang out a while," Starlitz said. He gripped his nose with thumb and forefinger. Suddenly, without another word, Starlitz tumbled backward from the boat into the dark Baltic water. In a few short moments he was lost from sight.