Penguin Lost

Andrey Kurkov

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It took Viktor three days to recover from the four spent crossing Drake Passage. In which time, the scientists who had sailed with him from Ushaia in the Horizon were already acclimatized and working fast to complete measurements and analyses before the onset of polar night. Viktor kept to his quarters in the main block, emerging only to eat or to take a peek outside. He went unquestioned, and even made friends with a biophysicist researching the limits of human endurance, such as the crossing of Drake Passage would have provided ample material for, had he not spent the whole of it seasick in his bunk.

Vernadsky Base was soon got the hang of, and Viktor ventured forth, wearing the obligatory bright red with luminous yellow stripes, and entering name and time of exit on a board to the left of the door. Failure to return within the hour would, he'd been told, bring the whole base out on search. The base had known tragedy, and it was not hard to see why, after losing 16 men and two supply aircraft, the British had presented it to Ukraine, quite apart from the Devil's Island appearance of it, viewed from the shore. The one and only place to relax was the bar, but there being neither barman nor drink, you either brought your own or did without.

Viktor saw his first penguins when walking with biophysicist Stanislav down by the dinghy slipway, and compared with his Misha, now languishing in Kiev, they looked toy-sized. "These are Adélie penguins," Stanislav explained. "We're not Antarctica proper, just an island." Their walk took them, via the noisy generator hut, to the set-apart magnetic research lab. "We've another Stanislav here," Stanislav confided, looking around uneasily. "In the sick bay. He's from Moscow. I mentioned you. He'd like to see you."

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The ailing Muscovite, a big man of about 40, lay on his back, legs bent, the bed being too short. His massive face was of a pallor suggestive of the worst.

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Biophysicist Stanislav slipped away.

"What are you here for?" the sick man demanded.

"Just to look round."

"Cut the crap! I'm Stanislav Bronikovsky, banker. Put on the spot and lying low. And you are?"

"Lying low, too."

"Good."

"Why so?"

"Makes us comrades in adversity. You might have come to do me in."

A long silence followed. Viktor rose to leave.

"Come when you can," said Stanislav abruptly. "We'll play chess . . . I could be of use to you."

From then on, Viktor became a regular visitor. He was not short of time, and it was cold outside, although less so than he had expected, a mere -15¡. The living quarters were well heated, but the sanatorium was even better. They played chess, and as they did so, chatted about everything under the sun. It did not escape Viktor that occasionally Bronikovsky was sounding him out, but there was nothing strange about that. Bronikovsky plainly suffered from a persecution mania, and a highly developed one at that. Viktor would never have believed it possible that anyone

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might send a killer to the Antarctic in search of him. Who, after all, was he that anyone should be sent that far? But Bronikovsky was important and powerful, a Queen to Viktor's pawn. Bronikovsky's fears might be well founded. Added to which, his strange, undiagnosed illness was growing steadily worse, in spite of the expedition medic's antibiotic injections. The medic had thoughts of consulting the Americans at Palmer Base, but was put off by the 300 km separating the two bases. So, racked with stomach pains and eating nothing, Bronikovsky lived off his massive frame much as the camel lives off its hump. As his pallor became bluish, he whispered that he knew who was poisoning him, but left it at that, and played bravely on, losing in stony silence. Reaching under his bed, he produced a half full bottle of the Argentine vodka Viktor remembered trying and not liking.

"Look," he said, pouring two cups, "I've a proposition. It involves asking a favour." Viktor looked attentive. "Tomorrow a Pole called Wojciech puts in on his yacht to take me off, give me a new identity. But seeing me like this, he won't . . . So you go in my place, if you like, taking my wife a letter and a credit card which is yours to use on the way."

"Except that I'm not you."

"For Wojciech, the work of a minute."

Viktor thought for a moment, then nodded his agreement. Bronikovsky's pallid face registered a feeble smile.

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