

# THE QUARRY

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Weight in Gold

Had he not been so intent on discovering what were to become the Lost Statues of Frunzenskaya, had he instead made his way out of the station like all the others, had he not dared to venture forth along dark corridors that led to machine gun-toting revolutionaries, his life might have continued on amicably for a few more years, at least until the alcohol poisoning that his life at the early age of thirty seven. But he was an inquisitive soul and thus had found himself atop a tank at the wrong end of the barrel with three tonnes of gold statue wavering above his head.

He was there. He had arrived. He had worn the ears off of all his family and friends as to the majesty of St. Petersburg – he, however, preferred the more affectionate name Piter. Now he was to traipse its very streets...except the word ‘traipsed’ implied that his venturing forth was unsure and unfounded; he was very sure of his path and where he should go. And all the chaos of Moscow (his Moskva) would dissipate amongst this semblance of culture. He knew that up ahead to his left were the famous marbled walls of Frunzenskaya, their decadence replete with golden statues calmly reaching out to the thronging masses. They had been the highlight of his readings during his schooling. He had already his notepad and fountain pen out to record his thoughts at that

moment. They were always readily available in the front pocket of his attaché pouch. They (the statues) were an ode to tepid times past; and to moments of sincerity through struggles. Stalin had been a quiet man. Would he have heard their call as he passed them by? Would he have heard anything above the bedlam? They were wont to-

‘Keep moving! And don’t leave bags on floor.’ The command was accompanied by a hand pressing into his back.

Vissarion momentarily faltered and then recovered himself to see that the presser had melted already into the crowd of thousands, with more to accost him if he were to remain an encumbrance. He regathered his belongings and made to join the masses.

At the station of Frunzenskaya, one of the city’s deepest underground stations at 105 metres, one had the option of several departure points: towards the streets of Nevski; down the way to the square of Lenin; or further along to the station of Electrosila.

‘Again fool! Why you not desist? Tourist!’

Vissarion was aware of the swarthy uniformed guard now standing in front of him. The man came up only to his shoulders but still cut an impressive figure. The epaulettes on his shoulders suggested he had been decorated for more than quelling crowds of wandering people on the metro. The name embroidered on his chest read Romek Abramowicz.

*Decidedly un-Russian.*

‘What your problem? There is no time for observation,’ the guard began. ‘Can’t you not sense mood here?’

‘I only just arrive now. I want to look round.’

‘If you just arrive now, you must go verify documents. Or else we send you away. But this is bad time for you to arrive. You should be going away.’

The guard was gone. Vissarion stole one more glance towards the resplendent wall and once again gathered his belongings.

He pushed past several babushki, rather forcefully, ignoring their cries of unorthodox behaviour, for they would do the same to him and not bat an eyelid. The metro in Piter was a hive for the infirm and decrepit: the women held out twisted and gnarled hands for money and crossed themselves every few moments whilst the men, mostly war veterans and sans legs, trundled through at

knee level, also asking for money, for a helping hand, for a prayer to god. People from all walks of life were represented on the Russian metro. The Russian metro face was perhaps the best poker face ever: faces devoid of any emotion, staring straight ahead, not warming to one another, not registering a single thought process.

Vissarion's eyes had been intently following the spiralling artwork on the ceiling, so much so that he passed by the escalator to the surface and continued around it before coming upon a dead-end at the underside of the escalator. He paused so to record his sightings and then turn back. There in a lugubrious niche stood a statue.

This surprised him, as he knew that Frunzenskaya had only the one set of statues along the esplanade, all other statues having been lost since the Cold War.

He moved closer and marvelled at the beauty this particular statue possessed. It was a finely wrought work that was both out of place yet couldn't have been placed anywhere else. The statue somehow belonged here. It hinted at some untold factor. It drew Vissarion closer...yet revealed not a thing after he scoured every inch for half an hour.

And he was now very thirsty.

The whisky was a welcome refresher after his travels. He hadn't had a drink in several hours. His bags were arranged on the small area of marble ledge jutting out from the floor and he was seated beside them. His coat and jacket lay over his bags and his tie was loosened. He was calmer now than he was beforehand, though that had not really been anxiousness he felt earlier. Merely the effect of his first time in Piter. So far, only minor chaos.

There was a steady hum that would have, without a doubt, without a thought, been attributed to the machinations of the trains. Vissarion only began to take note of the hum after a dull thump started drumming behind his eyeballs. Usually this occurred after a bottle or two of whisky; he had only finished his first flask. After a bottle or two, one could be forgiven for believing that elephants were dancing inside one's head. They would touch upon certain nerves and receptacles that elicited extroverted responses; right now Vissarion was sure he could feel the rumble of these elephants taking place outside of his

person as well, as if they were bouncing around in a china shop that was conveniently located to the aft of the station.

A stronger rumbling confirmed that Vissarion's constitution was still strong, that there was some deep disturbance rising up to the surface.

The violence of these rumbles was its strongest yet about twenty seconds later. Vissarion was rocked from his perch, his coat and jacket falling to the ground, his fountain pen rolling over to the far wall. Grumbling over his soiled garments as he picked them up, he moved also to pick up the pen and felt an intense heat on the right side of his face as he bent over. Turning his head, he saw... what he made out to be a door wedged open the tiniest amount. He espied steps leading downwards.

Another rumble. More heat – stronger this time – was propelled through the door.

Whatever was going on was taking place beneath Piter. Logic told Vissarion to walk away and take a canal tour: discover the creations that Piter had to offer from the sanctity of the puttering barge, to delve not deeper into certain chaos.

But these days, there was nothing logical in Russia and Vissarion wasn't about to start.

The passage was dank and grimy yet this was no matter as he soon came upon a sight that quelled any quibbles he might have held, at least for a few seconds – dead ahead was another statue.

Vissarion was a religious man by culture, not nature; his belief in fate, however, was paramount. He sensed that he was about to be graced by some epiphany that would have him on his knees in reverence.

He was there when he saw the fourth statue.

Vissarion crossed himself for posterity. He was all a jitter.

*Three statues more. I not believe such things yet I can see them with own eyes.*

The hum that had been so persistent earlier on had diminished to a barely audible drone. It lightly tickled one's senses and frolicked about the edges of perception. Vissarion had all but forgotten about it, lost as he was in his statue discoveries. He was still holding his book and pen and had continued to take down notes, though whether he would be able to read his writing would be

another matter as the light here was not at all strong. His fountain pen, he knew, was close to running dry and the refill cartridge was in a pocket of the bag left behind.

The distant hum had now been replaced by a sound that chilled Vissarion's blood. Chilling because Russia had made great progress these past few years without the aid of that sound.

He rounded a corner, coming out onto a precipice of a very deep-running, far-flung cavern and was presented with the following scenario, orchestrated in all its majesty and bedlam: the gunfire he had just heard was coming from both ground level and what seemed to be a hole in the ceiling of the cavern; soldiers on what were apparently the streets of Piter (the European quarter, he noted) were firing down through the hole at platoons of men and these men were returning fire; helicopters, amidst the hail of bullets, were taking off and attempting to exit through this opening in the ceiling, flying to who knew where; what looked like scientists were scurrying about across the cavern floor, having being concerned it seems with all the machinery (tanks mostly) that was assembled about this vast expanse, and now wildly fearful for their lives; the assembled machinery was now slowly rumbling towards a tunnel on the far side of the cavern; a rocket launcher was discharged and its payload slammed into the side of one tank, sending it crashing into another tank; several tanks raised their long shafts and returned a devastating assault; the soldiers on the roads above were sent into oblivion, not even a skerrick of their DNA would be recoverable; Vissarion was wild-eyed as he surveyed the chaos in front of him; he heard voices from the passage; he dove for a ladder nearby to him and which led downwards to the ground; bullets whizzed close by his head; he was close to having a conniption; the voices above were directed his way; he stayed on his course, sure he could find a niche to cower in.

The niche never eventuated for Vissarion; he slipped and fell from the ladder, but only a short way, onto a passing tank. He landed atop the swivelling gun head, holding on for dear life; he had a front row seat to the mayhem around him. The roar of the gun was deafening: wedges of rocks garnished the ground below, creating a haphazardly-shaped mural that ran black and red with oil and blood, respectively. One of the helicopters had taken fire from above and

it was spiralling back to earth. Vissarion watched the rotor blades slice through several scientists and soldiers and then pop off, to whirl past his head and embed themselves in a large drum of noxious liquid. The fervent purple liquid cascaded forward and lapped up those whom had fallen, whittling them into granular nothingness. A soldier fell from above onto the tank, a splash of red leaping up to cover Vissarion; he screamed aloud, his voice barely audible amidst the commotion, and pushed the body away.

The top hatch flipped up to reveal a quizzically goggled face. ‘What you doing here? You not soldier.’

Guns continued to play around them, bullets pinging here and there. The gaudy splashes of red were offset at intermittent periods by a fine pink mist.

‘Speak, interloper! Do not hide your inquisitive face.’

The tank slowed to a halt, the man pulling himself up out of the driver’s chamber. Vissarion stood up slowly, noting that this man also came up only to Vissarion’s shoulders. The name embroidered on his chest read Natan Abramowicz.

*Why so many Polish working here?*

The Pole began speaking.

Up above, the statue that had been hoisted into the air was now wavering dangerously, several wayward bullets having clipped the wire attached. It was ready to drop onto the two men below fifty seconds into the following impassioned speeches:

‘...and so you see that we ready ourselves now to take over that bastard city that thinks can give orders, that think we are lesser than they, that we like dirty monkeys. We start by taking back statues that belong to us. You know they were stolen from us and we look long time searching for them and then one day, stupid Russians, they give to us textbook of Russian history, replete with pictures of so-called Russian art and culture. They talk about famous statues at station. We Polish knew straight away that they were Polish statues, that Russians had taken them from us. We let them take vodka as theirs, but these statues are our pride and joy. We must reclaim title that was...*is*...ours....That is mindset we are in: we think like Russian and so we make attack look like Russian versus Russian. You are learned man. Why not join us?’

Vissarion's blood-streaked face trembled. 'You te-telling me statues I have held so dear to my heart are P-P-Polish, that you here to take them, that this mayhem is all for something in p-past, something so pet-'