

Eye of the storm



Keane's time in Q5 was shrouded in mystery. It was difficult enough to get him to talk about the cases in England. The overseas adventures were a fully closed book. Perhaps some of things that happened were so traumatic that it was not that he could not remember ... he would not remember. This is one of the few that he did recall ...

I

It was damn cold on the bridge and Atkins swore under his breath. Bloody Baltic winter, even worse than the winters during his last posting in Moscow. At least there were compensations in that miserable city. Plenty of cheap vodka, plenty of all-night parties with the other bored expats, and - if you were careful who you slept with - plenty of girls.

Most were OK - they were supposed to get information when they slept with western agents, but all they really wanted was good sex, not good information.

But a few were very dangerous. They were, of course, the most beautiful ones. Guess it made sense, thought Atkins as he checked the weapon in his shoulder holster - it was only the beautiful ones who would entice you to tell what you shouldn't. So he always stuck to the merely pretty and kept his distance from the beautiful.

The last girl before he was transferred was Anna. She was unusually passionate for a Russian and had a special way of ...

He was stopped short in his reverie by the sound of a Zhiv limousine approaching. Had to be the Russians - they did not let even the top-ranking Estonians have those. The engine had a distinctive thudding that echoed down the deserted snow-covered streets as it approached the bridge where the swop was to take place.

The car stopped and the rear door opened. A tall figure he recognized stepped out.

"Major Atkins. A pleasure to see you."

It was Borschev, technically head of the Russian Wheat Council in Tallinn. But everyone knew he was really the KGB's chief in the city. An important post as Estonia was a key satellite

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state these days.

The Russians had learned their lesson with the Hungarian '56 uprising. They had come to realize that the satellite states that were close to the free west were the risky ones, especially if the intellectuals had not been eliminated effectively. So the uprising had also been bad for the Estonians as their proximity to Finland meant they were felt to be very risky by the Kremlin.

Atkins held the envelope out to Borshev: "Here are the papers as agreed." He looked into the back of the car. It was empty. He had the cold feeling in his stomach.

"Where is Cansick. There's no one in the car!"

Borshev smiled. The smile on the face of the tiger. "No, Major Atkins, it was not possible for Cansick to be here. Mainly – in fact totally – because he is dead."

Atkins started to reach for his weapon. But Borshev smiled another tiger smile.

"Please do not do that. My colleagues behind you have their orders if you are foolish ..."

Then the smile again. "But please, let us have no unpleasantness. Be reassured, Major, that you are more use to us alive than dead."

He gestured to the open door: "Step inside if you will, Major, we invite you to come with us."

As Atkins reluctantly got into the Zhiv's back seat, Borshev took the envelope. "I think we will have the papers." He nodded to the driver and the car did a u-turn and went back along the bridge towards the darker side of the city.

II

The piece of paper was crumpled on the desk in front of Keane, but the four words were quite clear to the eye - yet unintelligible in their meaning.

'*Agent avatud silm torm*'. What could it mean, wondered Keane. Clearly it was in code. He spent some time writing out all the vowels – but that looked like Finnish and it was unlikely that Atkins knew any Finnish, he had only just been posted to the region before he disappeared. So he tried all the consonants. Then every third letter, every fourth letter, and so on until he decided to give up.

"What are you trying to do?"

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Keane jumped. He had been so immersed in his decoding efforts that he had not noticed Harries come up into the room.

“See what this message from Atkins means,” he said, annoyed at being interrupted.

“Atkins is dead. The message is false. That’s an end to it.”

“No! It mustn’t be the end. Don’t you see that’s what they want?”

Harries smiled in his rather superior, knowing way: “Atkins disappeared six weeks ago. We haven’t heard from him since, and our contacts out there tell us he is dead. Isn’t that enough for you?”

“Maybe they have their reason for wanting us to think he is dead,” said Keane sulkily. He didn’t like Harries and his certainties.

He picked up the paper and tried again to understand it. But he couldn’t. He walked over to the small office where Williamson was sitting, reading a file marked ‘Top Secret’.

Williamson looked up as Keane and Harries entered and took the sheet Keane handed him. He read it rapidly, as was his way, and handed it back to Keane: “It’s Estonian and its meaning is quite clear. Translated it says: ‘Agent opens in eye of the storm.’ Does that make any sense to you chaps on the Baltic desk?”

“No. It still doesn’t make sense to me,” said Keane. He did not mind Williamson reading his inward traffic, for Williamson had been in Hut 17 during the war – that was where the most difficult messages were always sent for decoding.

Williamson took it back and looked again more carefully this time. “To be pedantic, it actually says ‘Agent opens up in The Eye of the Storm’. Does the extra word make it more comprehensible?”

Williamson started to explain, his love of language taking over: “You see, Estonian is notoriously tricky to translate – English has two cases, the Krauts four, while Estonian declines in fourteen cases - nominative, genitive, partitive, illative, inessive, elative, allative, adessive, ablative, translative, terminative, essive, abessive, and comitative ...”

Williamson was about to continue when Harries interrupted impatiently. “Yes, Yes, very interesting I am sure. But what does it *mean*?” He turned to Keane who had reached for a large ring binder on the shelf beside him.

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"The Eye of the Storm is a night club in Tallinn. But it is a front - in truth it is the interrogation centre for the local KGB."

He turned to Harries, "don't you see, Atkins is alive and held by the KGB. That is what he is trying to tell us. And that his codes have been compromised. Agent opens up – he has been forced to reveal all."

Harries looked thoughtful for a moment, then: "OK, we need to get him out of there. I'm going to see the Chief to get permission for a find and rescue mission. We can't leave him to reveal all he knows."

"We can't leave him to rot, anyway," said Keane.

Harries ignored the remark and walked off down the corridor.

III

Keane relaxed in his seat and looked out of the narrow window. He could see the taxiway to his right. And ahead of their plane were two others, half-hidden in the swirling snow. He watched as first one, then the other disappeared down the runway into the snowy skies.

Suddenly, Keane's plane moved forward as the engines revved up. Slowly at first, but as the roar of the engines drowned out all other sounds, the plane started to surge down the runway. In a few seconds they were airborne, the airport buildings becoming grey and blurred as the snow clouds intervened between Keane's view and the ground.

Once they had taken off, Keane inspected the papers that Harries had given him. Atkins had been posted to Tallinn at the end of the summer – it seemed that he had become too settled in Moscow and a bit too familiar with the locals. In particular a girl called Anna Bobrov who had links with the KGB that were closer than normal.

His last assignment had been to arrange a swap with the Russians and give them some codes – that were actually unimportant – in return for Cansick who had been captured by the Russians and was rumoured to be held in the Lubyanka.

But something had gone wrong. Atkins had disappeared along with the codes and no there was no sign of him – or of Cansick - since. And the usual Russian contacts were strangely reticent about the case.

Keane fell asleep, lulled by the sound of the engines and only woke when the plane started

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to pitch and roll as it hit turbulence and the eye of a storm somewhere over the Baltic Sea.

The stewardess walked down the aisle, holding grimly onto each seat back in turn to steady herself, making sure all passengers had their seat belts fastened. She stopped at Keane's seat and gently reached over to wake him.

Keane had been in rougher weather in small planes, but that was somehow more reassuring – you could see the pilot at the controls, and in control. For all he knew, on this big plane the pilot had turned on the auto-pilot and was in the toilet being airsick.

The plane's engines took on a new higher note and he could feel the aircraft rise up and before too long the storm stilled and the twisting and rolling stopped as they reached calm air

The rest of the flight was uneventful and soon they descended through the clouds and Tallinn appeared below them, the dark spires on the city's many churches in the old town standing out against the snowy white of the modern city.

Once they had landed and he had gone through immigration - remembering that his passport said he was Andrew Bowles for this trip - he walked past the crowd on the other side of the glass doors and into the bitterly bright winter sunshine. He took a cab to the hotel ready to start his mission.

IV

The noise was appalling, and that was outside in the narrow street. Inside it was unbearable. No, reflected Keane, because he was bearing it. But only just.

The club was the favourite place of the well-heeled of Tallinn - mainly Russian diplomats – they were the only ones who could afford the expensive vodka and even more expensive women.

Despite the top notch prices, the Eye of the Storm was actually a dark, dirty cellar shaking with hard-edged music and dripping with the sweat of the dancers. Tall, slim Estonian girls twisted and jived with their dumpy Russian partners in the dank, sullen air.

And in the darkest corner of the club, there was a discreet door leading to the KGB rooms. Keane knew this from Atkins' surveillance report when he had first arrived. Atkins was a very efficient operator – just too fond of the good life.

Keane pushed the heavy door open as quietly as he could and slipped inside. There was no guard as the KGB had not thought anyone would do something as obvious as just walk in.

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The first person he encountered was not expecting him and the sound of the shot was muffled by the loud music on the other side of the door.

The second was just as easy – almost suspiciously so – again a single shot to the head Keane continued down the corridor to the interrogation room – he had memorized the plans.

The rest was almost routine. Before his current desk job, neutralising the guards had all too often been Keane's role in a raid. Harries had wanted to have a full assault with a team but Keane had talked him out of it – it was a mission for a single professional who knew how to go in quickly, get the target, and leave quickly. The SAS would have taken weeks to plan it, would probably blown up several surrounding buildings, and finished with a firefight in the club.

Borschev died instantly. Keane had heard of him and his methods and had a score to settle. The other two KGB men had had tried to draw their weapons, but they were too slow, they died just the same.

Atkins was alive – just – but not in good shape.

“Can you walk?”

“I think so. They didn't break my legs, just my fingers.”

Keane wondered for a second how Atkins had managed to type the message. But left that question unanswered for the immediate instant.

“Cansick?”

“Dead. Long ago.”

“No one else alive here?”

“No.”

Keane's report when they got back to base detailed the escape from the club, the dash through the streets in the car he had left waiting two blocks away.

The small boat was waiting at the quay as planned, and the short trip across the stormy Baltic passage was uncomfortable but uneventful. And a small plane was waiting in a quiet part of Helsinki airport where customs formalities were never necessary.

So it was that Atkins was taken out of the Eye of the Storm and brought back home.

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V

Two days later the standard de-briefing took place, Atkins sat quietly in the chair. He had aged a lifetime in those six weeks and his dark hair now had flecks of white in it.

Harries nodded at the stenographer and started. "Eleventh of January nineteen fifty-eight. To record the de-briefing of agent Atkins on his recovery from KGB imprisonment in Tallinn."

He looked at Atkins, "OK, you can start."

Atkins smiled enigmatically. "She was not what you'd call a beautiful girl, but all the same I was captivated by her."

Harries and Keane looked at each other. This was not what they expected.

"What are we talking about?" asked Harries.

"Anna."

"Anna Bobrov?"

"Yes. Like a spider she enticed me with her charms, then she held me gently in her arms, then she trapped me in her web." Harries sighed at Atkins misplaced attempt at poetry.

"It was Anna who caught Cansick. He fell for her just as I did, and that is how he was trapped by the KGB."

"And then?" Asked Harries.

"And then, once he had told all he knew – he had the Orion codes – you'd better change them – they killed him."

Harries looked at Keane. That explained a number of missions that had failed recently.

"And after that?"

"Oh, she turned her attention to me. Like I said, she was not beautiful, but I was captivated by her."

He shifted uneasily in the chair. "The codes you gave me for the Cansick swap were

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false anyway, so..." He stopped. It was obvious what was coming next.

"So you gave then to Anna."

"Yes," he said very quietly.

"And where is she now?"

Atkins laughed, but not humourously. "In the Eye of the Storm. Unless they have moved her body now."

Keane suddenly understood, the message, the broken fingers.

"She sent the message?"

"Yes. Once they started the interrogation and the beatings, I could see her in the corner of the room. I could see her eyes. She did really care for me. But Borshev found out about the message she sent, so he shot her. In front of me"

Atkins turned to Keane. "I'm glad you killed him, but I would have liked to have done that. More slowly."

VI

Rules were rules. And handing over information to the other side was the rule that carried the ultimate punishment. Keane knew that, and so did Atkins.

Harries got up and walked towards the other side of the room. While Atkins was talking to Keane, Harries fired a single shot to the back of his head.

Keane felt bad about Atkin's family - they thought Atkins was serving with the Army Catering Corps in Scandinavia.

Harries said he was going soft, but nonetheless, when Keane filed his report on Atkins he placed it under 'killed on active service' rather than 'dishonourable discharge'.

To be precise, the actual words at the beginning of the report were 'Agent dies in Eye of the Storm'.

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