

Vladimirskaya Oblast, Russia

Pyotr Luzhkov was about to be killed, and for that he was grateful.

It was late October, but autumn was already a memory. It had been brief and unsightly, an old babushka hurriedly removing a threadbare frock. Now this: leaden skies, arctic cold, windblown snow. The opening shot of Russia's winter without end.

Pyotr Luzhkov, shirtless, barefoot, hands bound behind his back, was scarcely aware of the cold. In fact, at that moment he would have been hard-pressed to recall his name. He believed he was being led by two men through a birch forest but could not be certain. It made sense they were in a forest. That was the place Russians liked to do their blood work. *Kurapaty, Bykivnia, Katyn, Butovo*. . . Always in the forests. Luzhkov was about to join a great Russian tradition. Luzhkov was about to be granted a death in the trees.

There was another Russian custom when it came to killing: the intentional infliction of pain. Pyotr Luzhkov had been forced to scale mountains of pain. They had broken his fingers and his thumbs. They had broken his arms and his ribs. They had broken his nose and his jaw. They had beaten him even when he was unconscious. They had beaten him because they had been told to. They had beaten him because they were Russians. The only time they had stopped was when they were drinking vodka. When the vodka was gone, they had beaten him even harder.

Now he was on the final leg of his journey, the long walk to a grave with no marker. Russians had a term for it: *vyshaya mera*, the highest form of punishment. Usually, it was reserved for traitors, but Pyotr Luzhkov had betrayed no one. He had been duped by his master's wife, and his master had lost everything because of it. Someone had to pay. Eventually, everyone would pay.

He could see his master now, standing alone amid the matchstick trunks of the birch trees. Black leather coat, silver hair, head like a tank turret. He was looking down at the large-caliber pistol in his hand. Luzhkov had to give him credit. There weren't many oligarchs who had the stomach to do their own killing. But then there weren't many oligarchs like him.

The grave had already been dug. Luzhkov's master was inspecting it carefully, as if calculating whether it was big enough to hold a body. As Luzhkov was forced to kneel, he could smell the distinctive cologne. Sandalwood and smoke. The smell of power. The smell of the devil.

The devil gave him one more blow to the side of his face. Luzhkov didn't feel it. Then the devil placed the gun to the back of Luzhkov's head and bade him a pleasant evening. Luzhkov saw a pink flash of his own blood. Then darkness. He was finally dead. And for that he was grateful.

London: January

The murder of Pyotr Luzhkov went largely unnoticed. No one mourned him; no women wore black for him. No Russian police officers investigated his death, and no Russian newspapers bothered to report it. Not in Moscow. Not in St. Petersburg. And surely not in the Russian city sometimes referred to as London. Had word of Luzhkov's demise reached Bristol Mews, home of Colonel Grigori Bulganov, the Russian defector and dissident, he would not have been surprised, though he would have felt a pang of guilt. If Grigori hadn't locked poor Pyotr in Ivan Kharkov's personal safe, the bodyguard might still be alive.

Among the lords of Thames House and Vauxhall Cross, the riverfront headquarters of MI5 and MI6, Grigori Bulganov had always been a source of much fascination and considerable debate. Opinion was diverse, but then it usually was when the two services were forced to take positions on the same issue. He was a gift from the gods, sang his backers. He was a mixed bag at best, muttered his detractors. One wit from the top floor of Thames House famously described him as the defector Downing Street needed like a leaky roof—as if London, now home to more than a quarter million Russian citizens, had a spare room for another malcontent bent on making trouble for the Kremlin. The MI5 man had gone on the record with his prophecy that one day they would all regret the decision to grant Grigori Bulganov asylum and a British passport. But even he was surprised by the speed with which that day came.

A former colonel in the counterintelligence division of the Russian Federal Security Service, better known as the FSB, Grigori Bulganov had washed ashore late the previous summer, the unexpected by-product of a multinational intelligence operation against one Ivan Kharkov, Russian oligarch and international arms dealer. Only a handful of British officials were told the true extent of Grigori's involvement in the case. Fewer still knew that, if not for his actions, an entire team of Israeli operatives might have been killed on Russian soil. Like the KGB defectors who came before him, Grigori vanished for a time into a world of safe houses and isolated country estates. A joint Anglo-American team hammered at him day and night, first on the structure of Ivan's arms trafficking network, for which Grigori had shamefully worked as a paid agent, then on the tradecraft of his former service. The British interrogators found him charming; the Americans less so. They insisted on fluttering him, which in Agency speak meant subjecting him to a lie-detector test. He passed with flying colors.

When the debriefers had had their fill, and it came time to decide just what to do with him, the bloodhounds of internal security conducted highly secret reviews and issued their recommendations, also in secret. In the end, it was deemed that Grigori, though reviled by his former comrades, faced no serious threat. Even the once-feared Ivan Kharkov, who was licking his wounds in Russia, was deemed incapable of concerted action. The defector made three requests: he wanted to keep his name, to reside in London, and to have no overt security. Hiding in plain sight, he argued, would give him

the most protection from his enemies. MI5 readily agreed to his demands, especially the third. Security details required money, and the human resources could be put to better use elsewhere, namely against Britain's homegrown jihadist extremists. They bought him a lovely mews cottage in a backwater of Maida Vale, arranged a generous monthly stipend, and made a onetime deposit in a City bank that would surely have caused a scandal if the amount ever became public. An MI5 lawyer quietly negotiated a book deal with a respected London publisher. The size of the advance raised eyebrows among the senior staff of both services, most of whom were working on books of their own—in secret, of course.

For a time it seemed Grigori would turn out to be the rarest of birds in the intelligence world: a case without complications. Fluent in English, he took to life in London like a freed prisoner trying to make up for lost time. He frequented the theater and toured the museums. Poetry readings, ballet, chamber music: he did them all. He settled into work on his book and once a week lunched with his editor, who happened to be a porcelain-skinned beauty of thirty-two. The only thing missing in his life was chess. His MI5 minder suggested he join the Central London Chess Club, a venerable institution founded by a group of civil servants during the First World War. His application form was a masterpiece of ambiguity. It supplied no address, no home telephone, no mobile, and no e-mail. His occupation was described as “translation services,” his employer as “self.” Asked to list any hobbies or outside interests, he had written “chess.”

But no high-profile case is ever entirely free of controversy—and the old hands warned they had never met a defector, especially a Russian defector, who didn't lose a wheel from time to time. Grigori's came off the day the British prime minister announced a major terrorist plot had been disrupted. It seemed al-Qaeda had planned to simultaneously shoot down several jetliners using Russian-made antiaircraft missiles—missiles they had acquired from Grigori's former patron, Ivan Kharkov. Within twenty-four hours, Grigori was seated before the cameras of the BBC, claiming he had played a major role in the affair. In the days and weeks that followed, he would remain a fixture on television, in Britain and elsewhere. His celebrity status now cemented, he began to move in Russian émigré circles and cavort with Russian dissidents of every stripe. Seduced by the sudden attention, he used his newfound fame as a platform to make wild accusations against his old service and against the Russian president, whom he characterized as a Hitler in the making. When the Kremlin responded with uncomfortable noises about Russians plotting a coup on British soil, Grigori's minder suggested he tone things down. So, too, did his editor, who wanted to save something for the book.

Grudgingly, the defector lowered his profile, but only by a little. Rather than pick fights with the Kremlin, he focused his considerable energy on his forthcoming book and on his chess. That winter he entered the annual club tournament and moved effortlessly through his bracket—like a Russian tank through the streets of Prague, grumbled one of his victims. In the semifinals, he defeated the defending champion without breaking a sweat. Victory in the finals appeared inevitable.

On the afternoon of the championship, he lunched in Soho with a reporter from *Vanity Fair* magazine. Returning to Maida Vale, he purchased a house plant from the Clifton Nurseries and collected a parcel of shirts from his laundry in Elgin Avenue. After a brief nap, a prematch ritual, he showered and dressed for battle, departing his mews cottage a few minutes before six.

All of which explains why Grigori Bulganov, defector and dissident, was walking along London's Harrow Road at 6:12 p.m. on the second Tuesday of January. For reasons that would be made clear later, he was moving at a faster pace than normal. As for chess, it was by then the last thing on his mind.

The match was scheduled for half past six at the club's usual venue, the Lower Vestry House of St. George's Church in Bloomsbury. Simon Finch, Grigori's opponent, arrived at a quarter past. Shaking the rainwater from his oilskin coat, he squinted at a trio of notices tacked to the bulletin board in the foyer. One forbade smoking, another warned against blocking the corridor in case of fire, and a third, hung by Finch himself, pleaded with all those who used the premises to recycle their rubbish. In the words of George Mercer, club captain and six-time club champion, Finch was "a Camden Town crusty," bedecked with all the required political convictions of his tribe. Free Palestine. Free Tibet. Stop the Genocide in Darfur. End the War in Iraq. Recycle or Die. The only cause Finch didn't seem to believe in was work. He described himself as "a social activist and freelance journalist," which Clive Atherton, the club's reactionary treasurer, accurately translated as "layabout and sponge." But even Clive was the first to admit that Finch possessed the loveliest of games: flowing, artistic, instinctive, and ruthless as a snake. "Simon's costly education wasn't a total waste," Clive was fond of saying. "Just misapplied."

His surname was a misnomer, for Finch was long and languid, with limp brown hair that hung nearly to his shoulders and wire-rimmed spectacles that magnified the resolute gaze of a revolutionary. To the bulletin board he added a fourth item now—a fawning letter from the Regent Hall Church thanking the club for hosting the first annual Salvation Army chess tournament for the homeless—then he drifted down the narrow corridor to the makeshift cloakroom, where he hung his coat on the rollaway rack. In the kitchenette, he deposited twenty pence in a giant piggy bank and drew a cup of tepid coffee from a silver canister marked chess club. Young Tom Blakemore—a misnomer as well, for Young Tom was eighty-five in the shade—bumped into him as he was coming out. Finch seemed not to notice. Interviewed later by a man from MI5, Young Tom said he had taken no offense. After all, not a single member of the club gave Finch even an outside chance of winning the cup. "He looked like a man being led to the gallows," said Young Tom. "The only thing missing was the black hood."

Finch entered the storage cabinet and from a row of sagging shelves collected a board, a box of pieces, an analog tournament clock, and a score sheet. Coffee in one hand, match supplies carefully balanced in the other, he entered the vestry's main room. It had walls the color of mustard and four grimy windows: three peering onto the pavements of Little Russell Street and a fourth squinting into the courtyard. On one wall, below a small

crucifix, was the tournament bracket. One match remained to be played: s. finch vs. g. bulganov.

Finch turned and surveyed the room. Six trestle tables had been erected for the evening's play, one reserved for the championship, the rest for ordinary matches—"friendlies," in the parlance of the club. A devout atheist, Finch chose the spot farthest from the crucifix and methodically prepared for the contest. He checked the tip of his pencil and wrote the date and the board number on the score sheet. He closed his eyes and saw the match as he hoped it would unfold. Then, fifteen minutes after taking his seat, he looked up at the clock: 6:42. Grigori was late. *Odd*, thought Finch. The Russian was never late.

He began moving pieces in his mind—saw a king lying on its side in resignation, saw Grigori hanging his head in shame—and he watched the relentless march of the clock.

6:45 . . . 6:51 . . . 6:58 . . .

Where are you, Grigori? he thought. *Where the hell are you?*

Ultimately, Finch's role would be minor and, in the opinion of all involved, mercifully brief. There were some who wanted to have a closer look at a few of his more deplorable political associations. There were others who refused to touch him, having rightly judged Finch to be a man who would relish nothing more than a good public spat with the security services. In the end, however, it would be determined his only crime was one of sportsmanship. Because at precisely 7:05 p.m.—the time recorded in his own hand on the official score sheet—he exercised his right to claim victory by forfeiture, thus becoming the first player in club history to win the championship without moving a single piece. It was a dubious honor, one that the chess players of British intelligence would never quite forgive.

Ari Shamron, the legendary Israeli spymaster, would later say that never before had so much blood flowed from so humble a beginning. But even Shamron, who was guilty of the occasional rhetorical flourish, knew the remark was far from accurate. For the events that followed had their true origins not in Grigori's disappearance but in a feud of Shamron's own making. Grigori, he would confide to his most devoted acolytes, was but a shot over our complacent bow. A signal fire on a distant watchtower. And the bait used to lure Gabriel into the open.

By the following evening, the score sheet was in the possession of MI5, along with the entire tournament logbook. The Americans were informed of Grigori's disappearance twenty-four hours later, but, for reasons never fully explained, British intelligence waited four long days before getting around to telling the Israelis. Shamron, who had fought in Israel's war of independence and loathed the British to this day, found the delay predictable. Within minutes he was on the phone to Uzi Navot giving him marching orders. Navot reluctantly obeyed. It was what Navot did best.