

Konstantin Zarubin
The Russian Heart Beats For All
Translated by Polly Gannon

April 12

From the working notes on the case of Þorvaldsdóttir-Menyaev.

Received by: Inspector Nurgul Ashimova, Special Department for Migration Control.

Sent by: Inspector Ruta Lastauskaite, Special Department for Migration Control.

“Resident:

Steinunn Harpa Þorvaldsdóttir

43 years

Citizen of Scandinavia (Iceland), born in Keflavik. Here for 14 years already.

Completed program for social workers in Ostersund, moved to the capital eight years ago. Currently living in Bromm, works as an administrator in a nursing home in Solna.

Last long-term relationship: 4 years 7 months, male, same age, lawyer, advises government institutions. Relationship ended on the initiative of the partner two years before acquaintance with non-resident. Has daughter from former Icelandic partner, 18 years old. Daughter left to stay with father in Reykjavik in August of last year, to finish school.

Non-resident:

Andrey Menyaev

55 years

Citizen of Russia, new-issue passport, Moscow. Profile in biometric system. Born in Moscow, lived in Moscow his whole life (except for one year in the US, 1997-1998, and half a year in London, 2004). Has not been to territories outside the control of Moscow government. Has not been present in St. Petersburg for more than two days since the June clean-up operation. Entered European territory illegally (Kronshtadt route). Crossed the Gulf of Finland and Bothnia illegally. Request for refugee status submitted in Umeo, September 3rd of last year; probable outcome – rejection without appeal.

Married twice. Son from first marriage (22 years) lives in Canada, no communications with father. Daughter from second marriage (14 years) remains in Moscow with her mother and stepfather. After second divorce (2021), and before acquaintance with resident, had no constant relations with women. No information on relations with men.

Last place of employment in Russia: manager of department of information defence in the “Homeland” agency of the Moscow municipal government. Appointed after the September coup, dismissed after the June coup.

Last known to work as a writer and television presenter. Author of six novels, including the bestsellers *Homo Cynicus*, or *a Great Love in Petersburg* and *Story of an Average Russian Woman* (both adapted for screen at the beginning of 2010s).

Owner of a premium-class supermarket chain in Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod for twelve years, sold his share shortly before the beginning of the war.

Date and place of acquaintance: 28 October last year, around 3:20, Stavnes, embarkation point for the suburban ferry serving the archipelago.

When they met, Þorvaldssdóttir and Menyaev were on their way to a party with night accommodations on the island of Lisslö. Þorvaldssdóttir is a well-known proprietor of an estate on the island. Menyaev was invited on the recommendation of Russian friends who rented him a room (a couple, both residents). Cultural workers, educators, and social administrators predominated among the guests at the party. There were employees of NGOs working with Russian refugees (“Eastern Railway” and “From Russia With Love”).

Þorvaldssdóttir's and Menyaev's story coincides with and confirms the security-camera footage (metro, Slussen, Bus 433, pizzeria, embarkation point, ferry), as well as activity on social media platforms, telephone locations of the resident, testimony of acquaintances, and the further development of relationship. No direct clues suggesting procurers or go-betweens.”

12 October

Half a year before the conversation in the Special Department for Migration Control

Menyaev pretended he was thinking. But he chose the Icelandic woman, all the same. What kind of idiot would you have to be not to choose an Icelander?

“Can I have this one?” He pointed to the end of the list. “Steinunn . . . Harpa . . .

He didn't know how to pronounce the Icelandic letter at the beginning of the last name. He guessed that it involved sticking the tongue between the teeth, like in English. And then what? A buzz or a hiss? He didn't want to shame himself in front of this fag from Kharkov.

“Steinunn Harpa Þorvaldssdóttir?” Kolya read out, without blinking.

“. . . What?”

Kolya repeated the name, syllable by syllable. The first letter turned out to be a hissing sound. The second half of the name was pronounced in a way Menyaev never would have predicted.

“Sounds nice when you say it,” Menyaev said.

“Thanks,” Kolya said, grinning. “I've been going out with a guy from Iceland for a few years now. I've picked up a few words here and there.”

Menyaev opened his eyes as wide as humanly possible.

“Wow,” he said, with the Moscow intonation he habitually used for underlings. “Just, wow. Well, Iceland's lucky. So miniscule, but it exports dudes for any taste. What's the population there? 500,000?”

Kolya paused for a while before answering. He examined Menyaev's chin for a few seconds, screwing up his eyes in merriment, as if there weren't a three-day growth of beard dotted with gray, but something else, something damned funny, something to make you shit in your pants from laughter, and only his European manners and political correctness prevented him, Kolya, an underground do-gooder, benefactor of the Moscow *beau monde*, from grabbing his smooth, taught, gym-bunny stomach under his clean shirt and guffawing.

Then Kolya found something no less hilarious in Menyaev's eyes.

"Fewer," he answered finally. "As far as I recall. Although the number may reach 500,000 soon. They've accepted a lot of people. From Arkhangelsk, from Murmansk. From Petrozavodsk, too."

Menyaev was determined to hold Kolya's gaze, not avert his eyes shamefully. But at the mention of Arkhangelsk and Murmansk, his eyes rushed diagonally from the right, and upward. Behind Kolya, on the yellowing wall of this basement headquarters, hung a map of Eastern Europe – from Warsaw to the Urals. A relief map. It showed plains, mountains, bodies of water, and didn't show any countries or borders. The military-political features were indicated only by a palisade of pins with red flags. The territory surrounded by pins reminded Menyaev of an amoeba from the school textbook of his daughter, who had stayed behind in Moscow. For enhanced resemblance, someone had outlined with a pen the organoid cities: Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Vladimir, Yaroslav. Etc.

The outline of St. Petersburg was also there. But for some reason it was located somewhere beyond the flags, outside the amoeba. What in hell could that mean? We don't control it, or something? How could it not be under our control, if we control it? The European fags are dreaming big. It's Peter's town. Our town.

"In other words, you would like to turn to Harpa for help," Kolya said, returning to the matter at hand.

"What? Oh, yeah. That one." Menyaev stabbed the name printed on grayish paper at the end of the list with his finger.

Newsprint. The cheapest paper.

"To Harpa," Kolya said again. "She's called Harpa, her second name. Sometimes people don't like their first names."

"I get it. Um-hm, Harpa's the one I want to ask. For humanitarian assistance."

Kolya's hands, folded prayerfully on a white office desk, separated. A neatly manicured finger pointed to a word in parentheses next to the Icelandic woman's name:

(ideellt)

Menyaev took his hand away from the list. Not too far, just a few centimeters.

"Keep in mind . . ." Kolya began.

"That she's an idealist?" Menyaev chuckled. "High-minded? That's just what I need! I could always see eye to eye with idealists. Take my word for it."

"Wonderful," Kolya said, smiling. "But the word 'iddeellt' means something a bit different. It means that the participant in the program is prepared to help without monetary compensation. A third of them are in this category. Harpa is one of them."

"But this is a poet's dream! Who doesn't want idealistic assistance for free?"

"Everyone does," Kolya concurred. "But you do have means at your disposal, don't you?"

"Ah, I see," Menyaev said. "So that's the way things work . . . you get interest on the ones who pay?"

Kolya shook his head. His eyes again spied out something terribly funny on Menyaev's chin.

"No. We don't get any interest. All the money from refugees goes directly to the participants in the program. Office equipment and other expenses," Kolya rotated his head toward the laptop sitting on the edge of the desk, "my husband and I pay for. Well, Tanya helps out with it, too."

"Laudable!"

"Thank you. Nevertheless. Excuse my importunity. I need the information so I can recommend the optimal variant. For you, Andrey, and for the other participants. Do you have any property or income?"

Menyaev sighed daintily. Patted his pockets.

"A thousand of the local cash, with a few copecks. At home another thousand. The rest is in Euros. Thirty-seven thousand in cash. Stuffed into the pages of the collected works of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky. I've kept them with me since my student days. I couldn't leave the homeland without it. In two accounts in Nordea Bank, altogether, two hundred eighteen thousand. In the account in Danske Bank, let me think . . .

Kolya raised his hand to stop the flood of financial information.

"Thank you, thank you. No unnecessary details. It's enough that you have means to live on. That means that financial assistance is not a matter of life and death for you.

"What, do they come in here like that?" Menyaev said, astonished. "With only the shirts on their back?"

"Some of them do."

"Show them to me!" Menyaev nearly jumped out of his chair with concern. "I'll become a sponsor! And I'll live for nothing with the Icelandic woman. Can I do that?"

"Another factor in the agreement for those who don't require monetary compensation," Kolya went on, after a moment of silence, "is that they always have the final word. They can leave the program at any moment leading up to it."

"And the paid participants can't?"

"Why wouldn't they be able to? Everything is straightforward with us, there is no cabal running things. But then they don't receive the second half of the money. So paid participants stay till the end. For the last three years, no one has quit before the end of the program. If you have your own funds, I recommend that you choose a participant who has requested monetary compensation.

While he was saying this, Kolya looked like he was already weary of smiling. Now he looked at Minyaev as though there was snot hanging from his nose that was in danger of dripping onto the desk.

"But I still think," Menyaev said, in the tone of voice he used for contractors from around Moscow (in the oh-so recent past, in his oh-so happy life), "I still think that it would be much, much more noble, from my side, to sponsor another participant. Tons of our altruistic liberals have rushed here to you. Choose one of the poorest ones from among them. The neediest. I'll pay for him. And I'll run the risk of taking on the unpredictable lady for myself. Since, as you say, she could skip out at any moment. Let her skip out on me, right? In contrast to your liberal comrades, I have a rough soul. Jaded, so to speak. I'll survive."

Unexpectedly, Kolya yawned. A huge, uncouth yawn. He didn't even try to cover his mouth.

"Liberal altruists," he said, taking the list of names and putting it back in a green folder, "are usually granted political asylum. But you're right, actually. Many thanks to you, for your offer. I'll inform Tanya that you're going to donate twenty-thousand Kroner to the assistance fund."

An unpleasant sensation of cold settled in Menyaev's stomach. He didn't expect Kolya, the polite, gay do-gooder, to take things so literally.

"Wait a minute, do you have the list of needy people at hand? Who are they, if it's not a secret? From Moscow?"

"There are always needy people," Kolya assured him. "Here, take a look at this." He took a rolled-up piece of paper from his breast pocket, and offered it the Menyaev. "Here's the address and time. Tanya will expect you next Tuesday. Keep in mind, however, that accessing 120,000 in cash from a bank might be difficult for someone in your situation. I advise you to take your Euros from Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky. Tanya will exchange them. The rate of exchange isn't too bad these days."

12 April

Conversation in the Special Department of Migration Control

The Þorvaldsdóttir-Menyaev couple was supposed to have been questioned by Ruta Lastauskaite. She had conducted the inquiry since January, and knew all the material: through video, social media, geolocation, personal case materials of the non-resident, and testimony of acquaintances on both sides.

But on the night of the 12th, Ruta's father died in Klaipeda. She called from the airport at six a.m.

"Nurgul, how many do you have today? Will you take over mine? One couple. Their case is almost spotless. If they don't fail to show up, approve them, and I'll take responsibility."

Nurgul couldn't refuse. Ruta had covered for her at least five times, in far less tragic circumstances. A month ago, in March, she took on two cases when Nargul's

family all came down with a cold. A rumor was afoot that some sort of bacterial tonsillitis that didn't respond to antibiotics was going around.

Nurgul had panicked, and stayed home. Although her husband wasn't immobilized, and was able to make porridge for everyone. The children didn't have sore throats—just runny noses and a temperature. Nothing more. Why, you ask, did she stay home? Karma got back at her through work. What difference would it make, if antibiotics don't help anyway?

"Yes, of course! I'll take the case, no question!" Nurgul sleepily nodded to the invisible Ruta, standing in the kitchen in her pyjamas. "No, it's no problem," she said, tripping, and breaking into a whisper. My husband has already left for his shift at the bus depot, but the children slept until 7:45. "I'll take them tomorrow and Friday, too. Stay there as long as you need to. Don't even think about what's happening at work."

Ruta sent her a synopsis of the Þorvaldsdóttir-Menyaev case. Four pages. Nurgul read it through on the way to work, and marked a few things for the conversation. In the office, while she was pouring her first cup of coffee, she glanced cursorily at the personal folder of the non-resident.

She viewed several clips from a security camera (the day of their first meeting and a few random encounters).

Ruta hadn't deceived her. Judging by the video and the excerpts, there was nothing to find fault with.

"Okey-dokey," Nurgul said, closing the file. "Okey-dokey, if that's how it is."

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Garik Tepoyan, their novice, was standing next to the coffeemaker. In his hand he held a mug with brown milky liquid. He held it as though he had forgotten what to do with it next.

"Everything all right, Garik?" Nurgul put her mug in the coffee dispenser.

Garik had rejected his first hopeless cases last week. It was absolutely justified, in line with instructions. But he was unnerved by it. He ran to Nurgul afterward, his eyes full of tears. He whispered to her a long time, saying he would quit this inhumane job.

He didn't quit.

"I just came through the reception area," Garik said.

Nurgul always drank cappuccino, but now she hesitated, her finger hovering above the buttons like it couldn't make up its mind.

"What's happening there?"

"The couple, non-resident Menyaev – they're not yours? Andrey Menyaev?"

"It's Ruta's couple. I'm taking them over for her, yes."

Garik glanced from side to side. Then he sidled up to her, and bent down his long neck.

"Menyaev worked in informational defense," he whispered hotly. "In the 'Homeland' agency. He's a son-of-a-bitch, like the worst of them from Moscow. They spread such disgusting lies about Armenia, and everyone else. He personally wrote that ..."

Nurgul pressed her finger with all her might on the cappuccino button. The machine shuddered, groaned, and hissed, interrupting Garik.

“Garik,” Nurgul whispered, after the noise stopped. “I didn’t hear this; you didn’t say it.”

Garik reeled away from her, and dropped his eyes. His narrow face blushed violently.

“Fictional couple or not,” Nurgul whispered more loudly. “We don’t ask any other questions. You understand, Garik? Other questions are for the court, or for the Hague, to sort out.

Garik nodded, without looking at her, and slunk out of the office kitchen. Nurgul took her cappuccino from the machine. Drank it. Made a sour face. Either it just seemed so to her, or the coffee really was getting worse every week.

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She returned to her office through the reception area. It was quiet. Josephine, the secretary, typed soundlessly on the transparent keyboard. Four couples waited their turn in silence, staring into the corners. Two of them were holding hands. One, the youngest, a same-sex couple, were locked in an embrace.

Porvaldsdóttir and Menyaev also sat together on a single bench, but about thirty centimeters away from each other, not touching or holding hands. They sat like an ordinary adult couple. Evidently, someone had coached them before the conversation. Coached them well.

Nurgul stopped three steps away from them.

“Harpa Porvaldsdóttir?”

The woman stood up and walked toward her, her hand extended. She was of average height, plump, with wide shoulders. She had a large bust and powerful arms, under a white sweater. Her legs, wearing jeans, were muscular, like a cyclist’s. The typical Scandinavian face inspired premature, unquestioning trust.

Her dark hair, which had been shoulder-length in the material evidence of the case, had been cut in a short bob. Very recently, it seemed. It suited her. In Nurgul’s eyes, it suited her, at any rate. What their departmental neural network would say about her new hairdo, no one knew. Porvaldsdóttir’s old hairdo had scored 71 per cent on the scale of physical attractiveness in the eyes of the average European partner of both sexes in her age group. In the eyes of Russian men of Menyaev’s age group – 89 per cent attractiveness.

Nurgul introduced herself, and shook the hand of the applicant. She explained why she would be leading the conversation, and not Ruta.

Menyaev, it seemed, had not lost any time, and started learning the language. In any case, he understood that Ruta’s father had died. He stood up out of respect. He mumbled some condolences by rote in passable English.

“Thank you, I’ll convey them to her,” Nurgul said in Russian. “Go take a seat, please. I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

Menyaev shuffled heavily back to the bench. The neural network had given him a 17 per cent attractiveness rating for an average partner in the range of forty. Now, observing Menyaev in person, Nurgul felt a strong kinship with the neural network.

In old photographs submitted for the case, Menyaev looked fairly decent, though even before there had been something formless and doglike about his face, something reminiscent of all those actors the women had drooled over in pre-war Russian TV serials. But the women in serials were, at least, also Russian. What did they know? It was impossible to understand this Icelandic woman. The man on the bench looked like a drunken Labrador with a little beard. Fat cheeks, a fat belly, flabby. It was clear he hadn't played any sports since high school. The good suit that his sizable torso was packed into even amplified the impression.

Well, okey-dokey, let's have a listen. Well hear what Þorvaldsdóttir has to say about his sexuality.

Nurgul asked the Icelandic woman to follow her. The Icelandic woman grabbed her muddy-green fabric sack on long straps, and slung it over her shoulder. Silently, she fell in line behind Nurgul, as she approached the doors of her office.

"Would you care for coffee?" Nurgul asked her, stopping at the entrance to the office.

"No, thank you."

"Good decision." Nurgul smiled and showed the Icelandic woman her cappuccino. "The coffee's terrible here."

"*Selecta*?" asked the woman.

"*Selecta*," sighed Nurgul, closing the door. "Come in, please."

The Icelandic woman entered. Not waiting for further instructions, she sat down on the same chair where the Lind woman had just been sobbing.

"We had *Selecta* at work, too." She put her sack down on the floor, next to the legs of the chair. "But we changed to *Kaffebilen* in the winter."

Nurgul took her place across the table. Half-turned toward the applicant, half-turned toward the computer screen.

"How is it?" she asked.

"Their regular brewing coffee is better."

Þorvaldsdóttir had a thick Icelandic accent, which made the words sound angular and sharp, like they were cut from stone. Not from a boulder, like a Russian accent, but something flaky and breakable, like mica.

"I'll tell the director." Nurgul smiled, for the last time. Then she woke up the computer. She moved the printout with excerpts and notes closer to her.

"Good. I'd like to remind you, Harpa, that our conversation is being recorded. The video will be saved in the archive of the Migration Services for the next five years. You have the right to refuse to answer the questions. You have the right to leave the room at any moment. The decision about your application will be made by me – either by myself, or, after due consultation, with Ruta Lastauskaite, who has conducted your case up until now. In accordance with Riksdag decree 2024/18: SfU5 on the authority of the Special Department of the Migration Control during the period of the State of Emergency, the decision I make will be final, and is not eligible for appeal

before end of the State of Emergency. According to the explication of the Constitutional Court from the 11th of May of last year, your answers, like any other information gathered by the Special Department of Migration Control, cannot be used against you or your co-applicant in court. According to the explication of the 6th of September of last year, in the case of a change in status of the non-resident applicant to the status of refugee or other status enjoying full rights, there is no need to ask for a review of our decision. The right to registration of marriage or other form of union on the territory of the Nordic Countries in this case will be furnished automatically.

“I understand,” said the Icelandic woman.

“Good. I’ll begin the conversation.” Nurgul turned the screen of the computer toward Þorvaldsdóttir with a jerk. “This is your last permanent partner, Mahdi Rezai”.

The Icelandic woman registered surprise, but, judging by her expression, didn’t experience a flood of emotion.

“That’s him,” she said, grinning.

“And this,” Nurgul tapped on the keyboard, “is Tinus Numann, whom you met now and then the year before last.

“Ah, yes,” Þorvaldsdóttir said warmly. “Tinus. My dear friend.”

“And this,” Nurgul brought up a third photograph on the screen, “is Mikke Lappalainen. You stayed overnight in his apartment no less than twice, in August and October of last year. In other words, not long before you got to know non-resident Menyaev.

The Icelandic woman frowned.

“Is it legal nowadays for you to do this?” she asked. “To gather this kind of information?”

Her voice expressed no indignation, only distaste.

“Yes. In accordance with Riksdag decree 2024/18: SfU5.

Nurgul turned the monitor around again. For several moments she examined the men’s faces forming a row on the screen. She liked Numann and Rezai unequivocally. Both of them had dry, etched features, noble noses, and high foreheads under a thick sheaf of hair. Rezai’s black hair was turning an attractive silver. Numann even had dimples. She would have liked to invite either one of them for an informal conversation to wrap up the Þorvaldsdóttir-Menyaev case. Somewhere on a romantic little island in the archipelago, where, as everyone knows, cultural workers and the high-minded employees of NGOs held drinking parties at dachas and estates.

Lappalainen left something to be desired: balding, he had a short neck, and a flattened face. Still, better than Menyaev by an order of magnitude. Powerful shoulders. And a strong chin.

Nurgul looked at the printout lying in front of her. She laid aside the first page.

“Forty-five,” she read on the second page. “Thirty-seven. Forty-one. Those are the ages of Rezai, Numann, and Lappalainen. In other words, during the past years you met with very fit, sexually attractive men of around your age. In Numann’s case – he was even six years younger.”

"Thank you for noticing, Þorvaldsdóttir said, smiling. "I never suspected that there was such a consistent pattern."

"But now," Nurgul went on, "you claim that one fine day, the twenty-eighth of October to be exact, you fell in love with a fat, ugly old man who is twelve years older than you."

The Icelandic woman shook her head slowly.

"No."

"What do you mean, 'No'? You didn't fall in love?"

"Not in one day. Not from the first glance. Not in that sense."

"In what sense?" Nurgul leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. "You're a social worker. You voted in the municipal council for the "Feminist Initiative" list three years ago. Non-resident Menyaev, at that same time, was spreading around disinformation and hate propaganda in Moscow. Tell me, please, in what sense did you fall in love with him? Tell me, in all its exciting detail, what kinds of depths you were able to discover in him?"

Þorvaldsdóttir looked at her like someone looking at a wild animal they hope to photograph and post on social media before it's too late.

"Do have special training sessions?" she said curiously. "Are you trained to conduct conversations like this?"

Nurgul didn't say anything. She knew that she had not overstepped any bounds. She had acted according to instructions. The instructions allowed the use of sarcasm and "a range of other forms of verbal aggression (cf. list below)," if there was indirect evidence, and the applicant displayed too much self-confidence.

"There are plenty of handsome men," the Icelandic woman said, without waiting for an answer. "But there's only one Andrey. First," and she bent her index thumb down, "he's exotic. Second," she bent her index finger, "he's a famous writer. Third, he makes me laugh. Fourth, he's a good cook. Fifth, he's impotent."

"Impotent?" Nurgul blurted out.

This was something she had never heard from an applicant.

"Impotent," Þorvaldsdóttir nodded. "He can't get it up. I tested very carefully. It only works with Viagra. Well, he says it does. I haven't checked with Viagra."

For a few seconds, Nurgul didn't know how to react to such a confession.

"You don't have sex?"

"Of course not," Þorvaldsdóttir said, smiling. "You said yourself: 'fat,' 'ugly.' 'Older by twelve years.' Why would I want to screw with him? In the laws about marriage, and – what did you say? – in the laws on "marriage and other forms of union" it isn't written anywhere that partners have to screw. Or have I misunderstood?"

"No," Nurgul admitted. "You haven't misunderstood anything."

"Fine, then. Because Andrey and I don't need to screw. We have very close intellectual relations. He's teaching me Russian, which I have always dreamed of learning. He calls me *moja prekrasnaja Islandka*" – Þorvaldsdóttir pronounced the Russian words astonishingly clearly. We understand each other in all everyday matters. He's a good cook, as I said. He takes care of the household. I come home from work –

the house is clean. In the kitchen, dinner is ready, and I have an interesting interlocutor. When I talk to Andrey, I feel like I'm in the movies. He has so many interesting stories about his life in Russia. He has such a fabulous mishmash of notions and ideas in his head. At the same time, he's very tactful and polite. On weekends, if I come home with a man, we all get along beautifully. Then I say: OK, Andrey, now we're going to have a shag. Bye-bye! He retires to his own room. And he doesn't disturb us till we call."

"You see other men?" Porvaldsdóttir clicked her tongue.

"How to explain it, Nurgul?" she shook her head with feigned self-reproach.

"That I screwed with Numann two years ago – you already know. And you also know who came to see me last week. Have I left anyone out? Or has Antifa run riot again? Did Antifa hack into your system and switch off all the security cameras in the district?"

Nurgul blanched. She very much wanted to tear her hair out and scream at the diode light in the ceiling squares. She also felt like venting her fury at Ruta. But she could just as well be furious with herself. She always cut corners herself in this matter. She was too lazy to check the security cameras next to the house of the resident during the period of co-habitation. She figured that even an out-and-out idiot wouldn't invite men to her house while a case was underway.

"You understand, of course," began Nurgul, regaining control of herself, "that the fact of your sexual relations with other partners significantly lowers the likelihood . . ."

"It doesn't lower anything," the Icelandic woman broke in.

". . . What?"

"It doesn't lower anything," Porvaldsdóttir said, raising her voice. "Your office exists to prevent fictitious marriages with refugees. According to a section of the explication of the Constitutional Court from the 6th of September, which you for some reason failed to mention, there are only two legitimate grounds for judging relations to be fictitious. Those are the proven fact of forgery, and the proven fact of procuring. Have you proven that there was a procurer?"

Nurgul pushed aside the second printed piece of paper. She found a note at the very bottom of the third page.

"On October 18th," she read with vehemence, "'at three twenty-eight in the afternoon, from Menyaev's telephone, a request for information about a route was made.' The person who made the request," Nurgul took her eyes off the text to bore a hole in the Icelandic woman with her eyes, "wished to know how to get from the apartment of Menyaev's friends to house no. 14 on Hellbibakken. In Rinkeby."

"And so?"

"On the evening of the same day, Menyaev was in Rinkeby. There's a security camera which very clearly shows him eating falafel next to the metro.

"And so?"

Nurgul breathed in slowly. And slowly exhaled. Oh, God, how I would like to tell this impudent lefty right to her face that at that address, Hellbibakken 14, lived a compassionate, idealistic blockhead; and that this blockhead was involved in procuring, until the Security Police kicked him out.

Unfortunately, there was no such information in the file. No one had dug up anything useful at Hellbibakken 14. There were a bunch of apartments, a bunch of residents of all shapes and sizes; but no one had managed to contact the procurers.

“Do you know who he met at that address?” Nurgul asked.

“I haven’t the foggiest. Ask him yourself. Shall I go get him?” said Porvaldsdóttir, pointing her thumb at the door behind her back.

Nurgul hesitated before answering. Before she answered, she’d have to calm down. She definitely had to calm down. The lefty was too mature, too juridically savvy, she knew too many cultural workers with dachas on romantic islands in the archipelago. And the main thing was that she was Icelandic. A citizen of the Nordic Countries. She could just scream, and incite an inspection by the Ministry, try to get her fired, and drag her through the courts.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Gather the printed pages back into one pile.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Neaten up the edges. Put your hands on the table.

“Harpa,” Nurgul said. “Do you understand that you’re helping a man who might go on trial for war crimes?”

The Icelandic woman moved closer to the table. Leaned over. Her confident face suddenly loomed in front of her.

“Is that your last trump card? she said in a loud whisper. “My conscience – is this your last chance? And you rummaged around so,” she said, tapping her fingernail on the edge of the printouts lying in front of Nurgul. “You tried so hard, using taxpayers’ money. Who did Porvaldsdóttir screw, how many times did she screw. And now, an appeal to conscience. Nothing did any good; so now you bring up war crimes.”

Nurgul gripped the table more tightly. She didn’t want the Icelandic woman to see her hands shaking.

“You didn’t answer my question.” Porvaldsdóttir moved away from her.

“Andrey Menyaev will without doubt be tried for war crimes,” she said in her normal voice. “Without doubt. In the European court. Most likely they’ll find him guilty and send him to prison. And then I’ll part ways with him. I’ll be forced to. But now I want to marry him. And I have nothing more to say to you.” She stood up. Picked her sack up off the floor. “Well? Shall I call him in? Shall I call Andrey?”

Nurgul looked her up and down. She peeled her hands off the table. Placed them on her knees.

“No, thank you. We have all the necessary information. As soon as we make a decision about your case, I’ll notify . . .” Nurgul lowered her eyes. “You’ll be notified.”